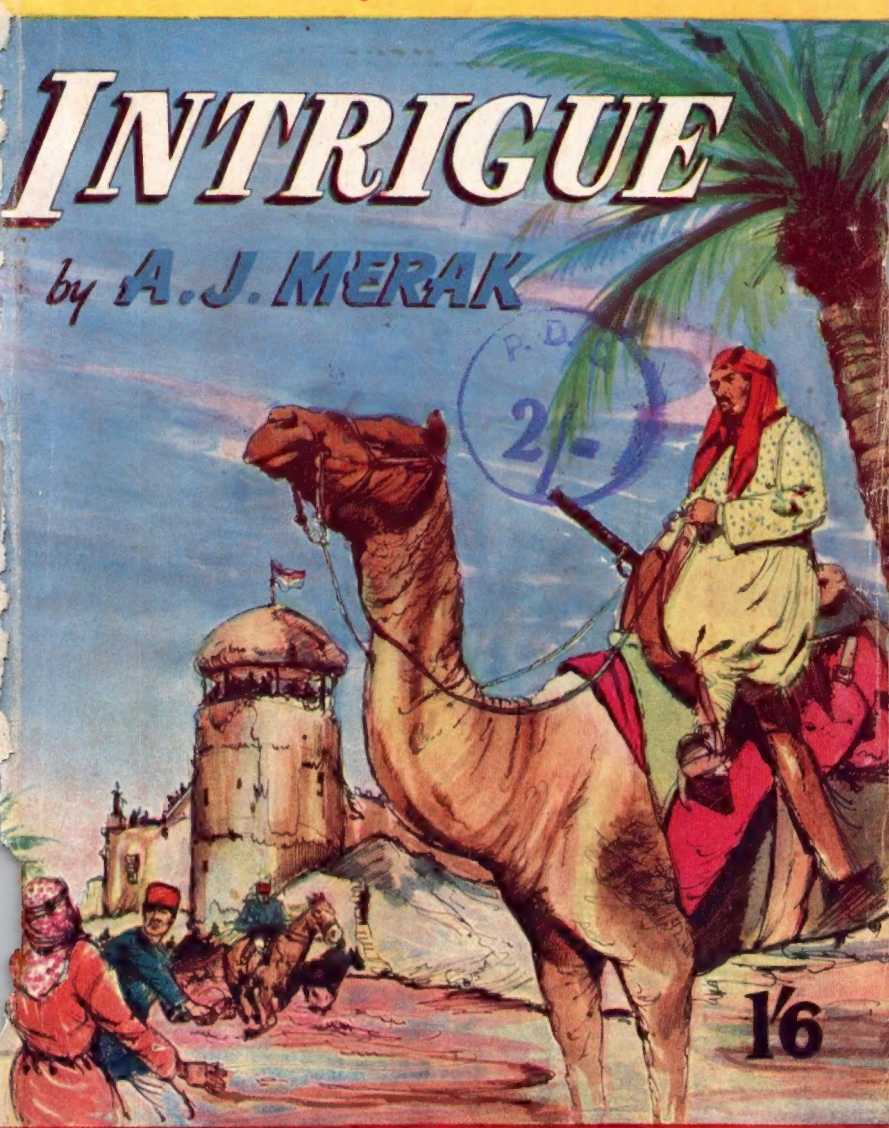
An all action story of the toughest fighters in the world

INTRIGUE

by A. J. MERAK



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By

A. J. MERAK

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All characters and incidents in this book, which is a work of fiction, are imaginary. Any resemblance to a real person, or to an actual occurrence, is accidental.

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INTRODUCTION

Away from the main camel routes, standing alone in the empty wastes of the Sahara, lay Fort Agadez, frontier outpost of *La Legion Etrangere*. A hell-hole in the middle of the desert, where men sweated and died beneath the boiling sun—and the lash of their evil Commandant, Colonel Minassous. Yet, in spite of its isolation, mystery shrouded this grim outpost.

Why were the two legionnaires, Valland and Heston, executed in front of a firing squad with no true details known as to their crime against France? And why did the hardened Commandant suddenly take orders from a simple Legionnaire? A man newly posted to Fort Agadez?

The two Bureau agents, Sergeant Peter Brandon and Corporal Jerry Conway, faced one of their toughest assignments when they were detailed to discover the answers to these questions. And especially that to the cryptic message received by Colonel Minassous from some unknown figure in the background:

The date has been set for ten days hence. Discover the secret and destroy everything! This order has the topmost priority!

What really happened plunged them into one of the greatest mysteries the desert has ever known. For suddenly, without warning, they were projected into the midst of intrigue on an undreamt of scale, where seemingly important figures were merely pawns in a game which meant life or death for the Legion.

Chapter One

LEGION JUSTICE

With almost meticulous care, Colonel Minassous glanced down at the watch strapped to his left wrist. A quarter to twelve. Almost midday. He tightened his thin lips, letting his hard grey eyes flicker over the ranks of men drawn up in rigid, inspection order on the dusty barrack square of Fort Agadez.

Every man, with the exception of the N.C.O.s and five legionnaires, who stood a little way apart—carried full fighting equipment. Rifles shone in the glaring sun. Heat shocked up from the white, hard-baked sand of the surrounding courtyard and beat down at them unmercifully from the towering stone walls.

Overhead, the sky was a brazen mirror of polished blue, nearly white, entirely devoid of clouds, marred only by the occasional swooping vulture that wheeled in ever-decreasing circles over the fort, as if sensing in some strange manner, that death would soon enter and claim another victim.

Minassous watched them with a detached curiosity. His mouth curled slightly in a hard smile. So they knew, too. Somehow, it didn't seem so strange, after all. Death was a constant visitor in the desert. Hardly a day went by without some poor wretch dying of thirst in the sand, or stopping a bullet. The vultures knew.

But this time, there was a slight, subtle difference. Two men were due to die when the blazing disc of the sun reached its zenith. Not from thirst. Not from an Arab bullet. These things happened quite unexpectedly.

But the execution of these two men was fixed, irrevocable. Nothing could prevent it from being carried out. Nothing.

The men were restless. He could feel that in some subtle manner ; a sixth sense that had been acquired over the twenty years he had spent as an officer of *La Legion Etrangere*. But they would stand to attention as he had ordered, and watch their comrades being led out of the detention cells.

Some would close their eyes as the two men were led forward and placed against the wall at the rear of the fortress, where the stones were already pitted and scarred with bullet-marks. But they couldn't stop their ears to the sounds of the sharp commands of Sergeant Guido, the clatter of rifles being brought to the ready, the harsh grating of metal bolts against the breeches.

The final command, followed by the fusilade of shots. Which was as it should be. His smile broadened and he was aware that the men were watching him as a man, hating him for what he was doing. His grip on the slender cane he carried tightened spasmodically into a white-knuckled hold.

"*Sergent* Guido!" he shouted harshly. "Take over command of the firing squad. See that each man has been issued with the necessary ammunition."

Sergeant Guido, small and lean, snapped instantly to attention and threw up a quick salute.

"*Oui, mon colonel.*" He took up his position alongside the tiny rank of men standing stiffly to attention a little way in front of the main body of the fort's complement of legionnaires.

Minassous could feel the tension mounting as the minutes ticked slowly away. Men tried to hold themselves stiffly erect, not daring to look at their companions for fear of catching his eye. For many of them, he knew, this was the first execution they had been forced to witness.

But their tension was as nothing compared with that felt by the two men in the detention cells. Each minute that slipped away brought them one step nearer to eternity. Almost, he wished that he, himself, could be there in the cell with them, listening to their last words, watching and noting every little movement that would betray their feelings, sensing the thoughts even that were running rife through their minds.

What did men think about when they faced death as closely and as certainly as this? The past perhaps. The times they had spent before they were foolish enough to enter La Legion?

Five minutes to midday. Three hundred seconds. Not long compared with a man's life. He could visualise what was happening down there in the stone cells below the main barracks. *Caporals* Manetti and Fizeau would be opening the doors of the cells, unlocking the stout chains that held the prisoners securely to the stone walls. Now, if ever, was the time for legionnaires Valland and Heston to commend themselves to their God.

In *La Legion Etrangere,* he thought savagely to himself, punishment was swift and certain. His mind spun into a tight web of sadistic purpose and hatred. Valland and Heston had been fools—but they had also been dangerous. If they had been allowed to live, they would undoubtedly have gotten in the way of his plans.

Therefore, there had been only one thing to do, only one course left open to him. They had to be removed. An Arab bullet was too uncertain, leaving too much to chance. And he had never left anything to chance. That was how he had managed to ride roughshod over the heads of his rivals and carve out a nice little position for himself in an out-of-the-way place such as Fort Agadez.

Being in command here was not to the liking of many French officers. The entire area was a hot-bed of treachery and intrigue, sudden death and swift retribution. But it was

isolated, far enough removed from the main camel routes, and the Headquarters of the Legion for him to make his plans and carry them through, unmolested.

And Valland and Heston had discovered a little too much about these plans for him to feel secure in his present position. At first, he had tried the obvious course—bribery. It had irked him a little to humble himself thus in front of common legionnaires, but it was the simplest way out.

Get them to accept money in return for keeping their mouths shut about his activities, and in the eyes of French law, they were in it as deeply as himself. But the pigs were Englishmen! And surprisingly enough, they had refused his offer. A generous offer, too. But then, was it not said that all Englishmen were fools?

So he had been forced to take the other course. A trumped up charge of mutiny, backed by the sworn testimony of *Sergent* Guido and *Caporal* Manetti—both good men. In ordinary circumstances, the men should have been taken under guard to Algiers and tried there by court-martial.

But out here, at Fort Agadez, the Commandant made—and enforced—his own laws. Valland and Heston had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death, as was the custom in the Legion for attempted mutiny. And now, at the time appointed, they were to be executed, and once more he would begin to feel easier in his mind.

A minute to midday. Already there was a low muttering from the ranks of waiting men. Even the N.C.O.s were shuffling nervously from one foot to the other. Well, let them shuffle, he though sadistically. He was in command here. And the sooner they all realised it, the better.

He turned his head slightly so that he could make out the heavy wooden door at the base of the barrack-block, leading down into the cells. It was closed at the moment, but any minute now and——

He nodded finally, satisfied. The shaft of sunlight on the

closed door was moving visibly now. The door was swinging slowly open. He narrowed his eyes against the pitiless, streaming glare of the sun. Yes, there they were.

Valland first, shuffling forward, wincing a little with every step, screwing up his eyes against the sudden change from darkness to blinding daylight. A tall, thin, aristocratic-looking Englishman with greying hair, his eyes sunken deep in his head.

But in spite of the ordeal through which he had evidently gone, he still held his head high, disdaining the helping hands of the two corporals.

Behind him, small and diminutive by comparison, came Heston. Colonel Minassous snarled angrily. Damn the man! The Cockney legionnaire was still grinning at the world with that stupid, inane smile. To a casual onlooker, it would have appeared as if he were walking along one of his smoky London streets, instead of marching to his death in front of the rifles of five of his former comrades.

He watched narrowly as the escort marched smartly beside the two prisoners along the front rank of men, then wheeled sharply across the shimmering courtyard, halting at the rear of the fort.

"Blindfold the prisoners," yelled Minassous sharply. There was a slight pause, during which Manetti was seen to speak with Valland and Heston. Then the corporal stepped back a little way with a surprised expression on his broad features.

"They refuse to be blindfolded, *mon colonel,*" he called finally, uncertainly.

"Then let them die with their eyes open, imbecile!" roared Minassous angrily, glancing briefly at his watch. If there was one thing he demanded, it was punctuality. If he, Colonel Minassous, said a man was to die at midday, he was to die then, not at one minute past.

A moment later, Valland and Heston had been lined up

against the bullet-scarred wall, their eyes open wide, staring unseeing at the sun. Corporal Manetti left them and stood a little to one side, out of the line of fire. Fizeau went the other way, and took up his position at the end of the rank of five legionnaires.

"*Sergent* Guido!" Minassous bawled the order at the top of his voice. "Carry out the execution!"

"*Oui, mon colonel.*" Guido took a step forward, his face hard and grim in the yellow sunlight. He raised his right hand.

"Rifles at the ready," he yelled, his words cutting into the still air like a quivering threat.

Lebels clicked into position. The five men stood like statues carved out of unmoving stone, rifles pressed against the shoulders, eyes squinting along the sights, aiming for the two white patches on the prisoners' chests.

"Take aim!"

The vultures wheeled lower, shrieking at the silent heavens.

"Fire!"

The air rang with the sharp clatter of the fusilade of shots.

For an instant, the two men stood upright, quite dead, eyes staring sightlessly in front of them, their bodies still not accepting the fact that the thudding bullets had gone home in their quivering flesh.

Then, almost ludicrously, their taut limbs loosened. They slid down the roughness of the white stone wall with its faint filming of grey dust, blood staining the whiteness of their shirts, the cloth of their tunics tearing on the bricks. Their muscles twitched several times before they finally relaxed in that peculiar posture of death.

Almost stupidly, the five men making up the firing detail lowered their rifles to the ground and stood looking round at the colonel. Their faces were slack, mouths hanging open, their brains scarcely comprehending the stark fact that the

deed had been done. That they had just killed two of their comrades out of hand.

They tried hard to smile in the glaring sunlight, sweat streaming in rivulets down their tanned, muscular features. For an instant, looking at them, Minassous felt a thin screaming of nausea in the pit of his stomach. It was as if each of the five brains had flashed an unseen, unheard message to him.

Was it I who fired the live bullet, or was I one of the fortunate ones with the blank round of ammunition in my rifle?

Fools! he thought sharply. Any legionnaire in his right mind could tell whether his rifle held a blank cartridge or a live bullet. A bullet gave a kick to a Lebel that could be felt quite easily. But that reason was so simple, so basic, that it would completely escape the tortuous minds of the legionnaires in the firing squad.

There was a moment of utter stillness, broken only by the uneasy shuffling of the men standing on parade and the thin cries of the vultures swooping ever lower. He snapped out of his reverie and blinked sardonically at the men.

"All right, *mes enfants.* All right!" he snapped thinly. Blood suffused his cheeks and there was a little muscle quivering uncontrollably in his out-thrust jaw. "Don't stand there gaping! Stand to attention, you snivelling dogs! *Sergent!* Get a burial party out and remove those two bodies. Fort Agadez has no place for traitors to France—even dead ones."

He waited with ill-concealed impatience, tapping the side of his polished boot with the slender cane. Sergeant Guido came forward, holding himself stiffly, his face averted slightly from the twisted bodies. With a sharp movement of his right hand, he motioned three men to fall out of the waiting ranks.

Only then did Colonel Minassous make his way back to the comparative coolness of his office. There was brandy in

the small cupboard and a glass on the tiny wooden table. He cursed angrily beneath his breath as he poured himself a stiff drink and noticed that his hands were shaking slightly.

This would never do, he told himself savagely, gritting his teeth. The men were dead now, and nothing he or anyone else could do would bring them back to life. At least one threat to his position had been removed.

He gulped down the raw spirit and felt a little better. With a supreme effort he controlled the shaking of his fingers and refilled his glass. The execution which had been so efficiently and admirably carried out, had actually killed two birds with one stone.

For several months now, there had been a sense of definite unrest in Fort Agadez. An undertone of warning that could be sensed rather than seen. And it had been one which he could not ignore. To have done so would have been fatal. The only way out, which he had seen, had been to make an example of someone, show them all that he, Marcel Minassous, was the commandant of the fort.

And the opportunity to achieve this had come sooner than he had anticipated. Valland and Heston had always been trouble-makers, ever since they had been posted to his command. English dogs!

He swore heatedly under his breath. Men with peculiar ideals, a strange, unshakeable sense of loyalty. And worst of all, men who had known too much and who couldn't be bought. His thoughts stopped at a sudden knock on the door.

"*Entrez*!" he yelled. The bottle of brandy disappeared out of sight below his desk.

The door opened quietly and Sergeant Guido entered the office. A little humourless smile twisted the muscles of his mouth. But his eyes were grim and his bearing stiff and formal.

"Well, Guido. Have the bodies of the inquisitive Englishmen been removed?"

"*Oui, mon colonel.* The party detail buried them just outside the walls of the fort in the desert." He laughed harshly. "A couple of insignificant graves for a couple of traitors."

Minassous nodded slowly to himself and hauled himself to his feet. He took a restless turn about the office, his hands clasped behind his back.

"This is a rather unfortunate turn of events, Guido," he said finally in a low voice. "Very unfortunate."

"But why, *mon colonel*? The laws of the Legion must be enforced, especially in an isolated outpost such as Fort Agadez. Here, a man has to be tough to survive. And iron discipline is necessary if we are to continue as a well-trained fighting machine."

The sergeant moved slightly forward, resting his heavy body on the colonel's desk. "The Englishmen were spies. They had to die. Besides, we've known for a long time that there are several men in the fort who were sympathetically disposed to Valland and Heston's ideas. They could have taken over the fort if we hadn't acted.

. "It was the only way. Their death will serve as a warning that we don't intend to allow things to get out of hand. And that anyone else who thinks he can set himself up against the commandant will meet the same end." His laugh grew unpleasant.

"Good. Excellent." Minassous nodded his head, grimly. "The big trouble will come if word of what has happened gets to Legion Headquarters. They don't appreciate the complexity of life in a place such as this. And if they should send anyone down here—a Bureau agent for instance, then we must——"

"We must see to it that he doesn't get very far," muttered the Sicilian menacingly. "It should be comparatively easy

to pick out a Bureau agent. From now on, every man posted to Fort Agadez will be watched carefully for every minute. Any false move on his part and——"

He left the remainder of his sentence unsaid and ran his finger across his throat in a gesture which was universal in its meaning.

"So?" Minassous' eyes blinked sardonically at the other.

"So we've nothing to fear, *mon colonel.* All that is necessary is that we mustn't lose our heads."

"That will do, Guido," snapped the colonel stiffly. His look fastened harsh on the sergeant. "Let's forget this foolish talk about Bureau investigation, which is an exceptionally remote possibility. The records on Valland and Heston are clear as far as they are concerned.

"The two men were charged with mutiny and espionage against France. This being a capital offence they should, under normal circumstances, have been transferred to the Headquarters at Algiers. However, that was not possible in the case of an isolated outpost such as this and they were court-martialled here under my jurisdiction. On being found guilty, the sentence of death was passed on them, and carried out this morning."

The Sicilian shrugged his broad shoulders. It was a completely reflex gesture with no real meaning behind it. Two men had died, but it made little difference to him. During his long campaign with *La Legion,* he had seen men die under a variety of conditions. *Le cafard* had claimed many ; others had been shot in the back by their own comrades. What difference did it make whether they died in front of a firing squad or out in the desert, stumbling on and on, almost dead with thirst, with no hope of reaching an oasis?

Minassous stood stiff as an iron bar. When he spoke again, it was almost as if he were strangling : "I think we'd better take a look at their possessions, *Sergent.* Where are they?"

Guido came to attention and emptied the small heap of varied objects on to the top of the polished desk. It was pitifully small, but then, men had little of their own in the Legion.

"That is all they had, *mon colonel.*" Minassous lowered himself in his chair and stared down at the scattered objects for a long moment, before reaching out with his right hand, fumbling among them, turning them over and over in his fingers.

A few *sous,* a rusted key on a key-ring, a torn, tattered photograph and an empty cartridge clip. The colonel picked up the photograph and looked at it more closely.

"Hmmm! Not bad looking, *Sergent,* if you prefer that type. His wife? Fiancée?" He looked to Guido for information.

The sergeant shook his head slightly in bewilderment. "I've no idea, Colonel." He glanced at the picture and pursed his lips. "That belonged to Heston, I remember. He never mentioned her. At least, not to my knowledge. Perhaps some of the men would know."

"Was he particularly friendly with any of them?" There was an unnatural sharpness in the other's tone. "Think back, *Sergent*! This is of the utmost importance."

Guido was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Only the American Clarke and LeBreau, the Frenchman."

"I see. Then we'll have to watch these men." He threw the photograph down on to the desk. "This is a matter of the utmost secrecy," he said tonelessly. His hands stiffened on the top of the desk. "No one—I repeat, no one—is to have word of what we have discussed. Understand?"

"Perfectly, Colonel." Guido licked his lips with a dreadful hunger. "We're not altogether careless in *La Legion.* As Valland and Heston found out to their cost. They spoke together when they thought themselves to be absolutely safe, But even the walls have ears in Fort Agadez."

True enough, thought Minassous calmly. Some of the tension was beginning to leave his mind. *Perhaps he had been over-cautious, strung-up since the execution. Seeing danger where none really existed.*

He paused, his face tight, staring down at the objects on the desk in front of him. There was something wrong here. At first he didn't realise what it was. Then he knew. He knew!

Something slipped into place in his brain, as if a ratchet had slotted itself into its bearing and was whirring away inside his mind. *The thing carried by every legionnaire,* laughed his mind. *Where were they? Valland should have had one. And Heston, too!*

The commandant stood up. He leaned forward across the desk, his features suddenly hard and taut. For an instant it was as if he intended to attack the sergeant. Then, with an effort, he controlled himself. His fists relaxed their white-knuckled grip on the polished edge.

"Was this all you found on the two prisoners?" he snapped.

"Why, yes, *mon colonel.* There was nothing else. We searched every scrap of clothing before it was burned."

"And the bodies themselves? What of them? Were they searched?"

"Of course." The Sicilian nodded his close-cropped head emphatically. "That is all they possessed. I would stake my life on that."

"I'm glad to hear you say it, *Sergent.* Because you may have to stake your life. The identity discs, fool! Where are they? They must have been on the bodies. They must have been!" He grew aware that he was screaming the words at the top of his voice.

"I——"

"Dolt! Imbecile!" barked Minassous, snapping at the other. "Can't you realise that you're in this as much as I

am. And we're both in it up to our necks. We can't afford the slightest mistake." He controlled his rage and lowered his voice.

"Now try to remember. Are you certain the identity discs were not on the bodies? Can you be sure?"

The sergeant stood in thought for a moment. The hard expression on his grim features never changed as he said thinly:

"I'm quite positive, *mon Commandant.* I trust you do not doubt my word. But there were no identity discs on either of the two prisoners."

Minassous stiffened in his chair. The rising urgent pulse of impending disaster tensed his body. But it served to clear his brain, erasing all the little thoughts that kept creeping in, clogging his mind.

"Then there's only one possible explanation," he muttered harshly. "They must have gotten rid of them somewhere. But how? And where?" He sucked in a deep breath. "Or —to whom?"

Chapter Two

ESCAPE FROM FORT AGADEZ

Legionnaire Clarke stood stiffly to attention and watched the commandant walk slowly towards the barrack block on the opposite side of the sun-glaring courtyard. Hatred twisted inside his brain like a knife.

He swore savagely under his breath, feeling the sun burning his neck even through the thickness of his *kepi* and neck-cloth. Someday, one of the men would catch up with that swine of a commandant. And he hoped intensely that he would be the lucky one.

Just to feel his fingers tightening around the other's windpipe would give him the greatest pleasure he had ever known. But already a plan was beginning to form in his mind. Trouble had been mounting in the fort for several months now.

He had felt it from the very beginning, had sensed it coming, recognising the rising tension which had been hanging over the fort in the still desert air. At first, there had been only tiny signs ; little things, completely innocuous in themselves. But when one came to look back on them, they all added up to give a very clear picture of what was wrong, and a warning that more was to come.

Minassous disappeared inside his office, closing the door softly behind him. Over by the bullet-scarred wall, the burial party were dragging the bodies of Valland and Heston towards the main gate, where a couple of sentries stood ready to swing it open at a command from Sergeant Guido.

Somehow the smooth marks in the sand, where the bodies had been pulled across the courtyard, seemed to set their seal on the utter absurdity and stupidity of trying to make a break for it. The chances were that he would make it from the fort all right.

But—what happened then?

Between Fort Agadez and the nearest oasis lay twenty kilometres of burning sand. An endless waste in which a man could lose himself with ease. Unless he could, somehow, get hold of a compass. But that was stretching things a bit too far. Only the officers and, in certain cases, the sergeants were allowed to carry compasses.

To issue them to the ordinary legionnaires would be courting disaster and encouraging escape. He thought fast. The desert was the only alternative to a life of blistering hell inside the fortress. But there were other things which had happened which prompted him to consider escape across the desert.

The two English legionnaires who had just been shot by the firing squad. His lips curled cynically. Murdered was a better name for it. They had been on to something. He was sure of that.

Otherwise why had the commandant been so eager to get them out of the way before they had talked. His smile broadened though he was careful not to let the sergeant catch a glimpse of the expression on his features.

Because, unknown to them, both Valland and Heston *had* talked. He glanced across to where LeBreau, the small, diminutive Frenchman, stood stiffly to attention in the rank in front of him. He saw that the other was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

LeBreau nodded his head slightly, almost imperceptibly, as if sensing the other's thoughts. Clarke was satisfied. That nod had told him all he wanted to know. The decision was up to him. If he decided to make a break for it, he could count on LeBreau to make it with him.

But they would have to be careful. Every move they made would be watched. Because even if it hadn't been already discovered, it soon would be, that the identity discs belonging to the prisoners had been removed.

And Minassous would begin to put two and two together and add it up to make—trouble! Much of what Valland and Heston had spoken about he had been unable to understand. Something was about to break out there in the empty wastes of the Sahara. But they had been unable to learn more of this before Guido had come and the two Englishmen had been whipped off into the detention cells.

He felt a mass of half-formed thoughts and ideas begin to whirl inside his brain. So many things had happened during the past few weeks that it had been almost impossible to keep up with them. But Minassous was afraid. That was quite obvious from what had happened.

A sudden command from the corporal at the end of the ranks jerked the thoughts out of his mind. "Move yourselves, *mes enfants. Marche!*"

Slowly they made their way off the vast square, filing back to their positions on the parapets or into the coolness of the barrack block. Clarke found himself on the narrow stone parapet, overlooking the flat harsh expanse of the desert that ringed the fort round like a stretching sea of death.

As luck would have it, LeBreau paced the wall with him and although conversation was possible, it had to be as discreetly as possible. Down below, the eagle eye of Sergeant Guido watched them from the courtyard as he made his way to the commandant's office with the few remaining personal belongings of the dead men.

"If we're to make a break for it at all, it'll have to be tonight, bud," muttered the American as he paced past the tiny Frenchman. "Otherwise that commandant will get wise to us for sure, and then we'll never stand a cat in hell's chance. You see that, don't you?"

"Certainly, *mon ami*," whispered the other out of the corner of his mouth. He shrugged and stared at the shimmering surface of the desert. "What do you intend to do?"

"There's a big blow-up coming. I can feel it. Valland and Heston knew something of it. But they're dead now. And dead men tell no tales. We must get word to the Legion Headquarters, of course. They can check this business and also look into our beloved commandant's background and associates. Should be a whole heap of leads here they could follow up." There was a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Maybe, *mon ami*. But remember, the Legion Headquarters is situated in Algiers. Do you realise just how far away that is? The best part of three hundred kilometres. We'd never make it.

"It would take us all our time to get as far as the nearest oasis. The desert tribes may be peaceable at the moment, but I doubt whether they will take kindly to a couple of legionnaires if they pick them up in the desert."

Clarke slitted his eyes against the pitiless glare. Well, he thought vaguely, that settled that. There seemed no way out for them. Even if they made their getaway, which in itself was a big "if," they still had to get word through to someone in authority. And what had they to go on?

A couple of identity discs, given them by legionnaires Valland and Heston, and a cock-eyed story concerning their commandant—an exceptionally competent man according to the records. Would anyone listen to them? His brain tightened into a web of dark purpose.

The first thing that would happen would be that a charge of desertion would be thrown at them. And while they were talking their way out of that one, Minassous and Sergeant Guido would be going ahead with their plans.

He paced the parapets in silence for a long moment, racking his brain for a way out. But there was none. LeBreau was standing a few yards away, rifle resting against the stone embrasure, his eyes staring out into the yellow distance. Finally, he turned, as if a new thought had struck him. His eyes flickered down to the courtyard below, but there was no one in sight.

Corporal Vartz was way over on the other side of the fort, his back to them, snarling at the sentries. For the moment, they were safe.

"There is a way out, Clarke. Just one." His voice was grave, but there was a trace of elation in it. "We can't make it to Algiers, but with a bit of luck we might manage to reach El Keb."

Clarke's eyebrows puckered in sudden thought. "El Keb?" He laid his Lebel by the side of the Frenchman's.

"Why El Keb? There's nothing there but Verdun Barracks."

LeBreau smiled thinly. "And the Headquarters of the Bureau Arabe," he muttered. "This is a case for the Intelligence Branch of the Legion. I have heard of this man, Major Picard, the head of the Bureau. He is a good man. He will listen to us, without asking too many awkward questions as to how we managed to escape—and why."

"But first, we have to get away from Fort Agadez—and reach El Keb." Clarke sounded grim. His steel-blue eyes narrowed to thin slits. He cursed wholeheartedly under his breath and repeated the oath in Arabic for good measure.

"We'll make it, *mon ami,*" said the Frenchman softly. "We've got to. Valland and Heston died because they believed in something. Whatever it was, it was sufficiently important for them to die for it, rather than live and accept a bribe from that accursed commandant. They entrusted the remainder of the mission to us. We mustn't fail them. We must see that it is carried out."

"Then it's a deal," whispered the tall, lanky American, reaching a decision on impulse. "We'll light outa this joint tonight as soon as it gets dark. And if there are any guards posted on the gates, they'll have to be removed.

"We can't afford the risk of anyone spilling the beans to the colonel until we're well on our way. That way we might stand a chance, although it's a pretty slim one."

Hardly daring to breath, Clarke stood in the dark shadows of the wall, watching for the slight movement which would tell him of the little Frenchman's cautious approach. Everything was quiet. The only sound which reached his straining ears was the harsh scrape of the sentry's boots on the parapet immediately above his head.

He swivelled his head round, peering into the blackness of

the desert night. The courtyard was empty. The deep marks where the bodies of Valland and Heston had been dragged across the sand had been removed, obliterated. But the memory of those two men facing the firing squad, scorning the black cloths which had been offered them to bind their eyes, still lingered.

There was a square of bright yellow light in the window of the commandant's office across the parade ground. For an instant, hesitation was in him. What if *Le Colonel* knew of their little plan. If all this was just a cat and mouse game played for his own sadistic amusement.

The idea of escape had been in his mind for a long time now. Fort Agadez was a living hell for the ordinary legionnaire. Here, brutality was the order of the day. A man was drilled on the blazing inferno of the courtyard until he dropped. And when he dropped he could expect no leniency from the N.C.O.s or the officers.

Discipline was harsh. Too harsh, even when compared with standards in *La Legion Etrangere.* He himself, had joined the Foreign Legion to fight. After service in the American Army during World War Two, he had found it impossible to settle down to the everyday duties of life during peacetime.

So, the Legion had been his obvious choice. And after his initial training at Saida, they had posted him to Fort Agadez—a madman's paradise, ruled by the iron fist of Colonel Minassous, a man who cared little for his men, so long as they were moulded into an efficient fighting machine.

His finger itched on the trigger of his Lebel. It would be so easy to put a bullet through the window of Minassous' office. And from where he crouched in the darkness, he could just make out the dark shadow of the commandant standing with his back to the window. But that would be foolish.

Even if he satisfied his greatest desire and killed Minassous, there were still the others. Captain Le Roche and Sergeant Guido. And even among the legionnaires and N.C.O.s, there were few who could be really trusted.

He stiffened abruptly as a dark shadow a few feet away suddenly moved and materialised into something more. Then he forced himself to relax as LeBreau came wriggling over, worming his way along the base of the wall.

"That you there, Clarke?"

"Nobody else, bud," he whispered back, edging his way forward, careful not to step out into the open where the eagle eyes of the pacing sentry might spot him. "Everything ready?"

The Frenchman nodded. His eyes were bright and sharp, like those of a bird of prey. He checked his watch. "Another ten minutes, *mon ami*. Then the fireworks should start. I couldn't get into the main arsenal. There were too many guards."

"But you managed to plant the fuse, all right." There was an urgent question in the other's tone.

LeBreau nodded again, emphatically. "It is in the auxiliary magazine. It will not destroy all the ammunition as we had planned, but there will be sufficient upheaval to enable us to rush the gates and get away in the confusion."

Clarke hunched his shoulders and leaned his back against the cold stone of the wall. The main gateway lay ten yards over to their left. But there was the sentry to be disposed of first. And that had to be done quickly—and silently.

The yellow square of light that marked the window of the colonel's office suddenly winked out of existence. Clarke swore softly. Already, the minutes were ticking away—and if Minassous came out in the middle of their escape there would be hell to pay.

Reaching out, he caught hold of the other's arm and

pulled him down, closer to the wall. The door of the colonel's office opened with a soft, barely audible click and the tall, upright figure of the commandant stepped out onto the hard sand of the courtyard.

Clarke watched him, unblinkingly. For a moment, Minassous stood staring about him. Then he turned and motioned to someone standing in the shadows of the doorway behind him. It was Sergeant Guido!

After peering about them for a long moment, they began to walk slowly across the square towards the main barrack block. They were talking earnestly in low tones and Clarke had the unshakable impression that they were arguing.

Hell, he thought dimly. That was funny. Why should Minassous be arguing like that with a common sergeant of the Legion. If any of the officers spoke to the commandant like that, they would soon learn to regret it. But here was Guido talking to Minassous like an equal. It didn't make sense.

He opened his mouth to whisper something to LeBreau, but it was never said. Something erupted like an angry, spouting volcano at the corner of his vision. Bullets spat and roared with an incessant clatter. Already, flames were beginning to lick around the base of the auxiliary magazine.

A sudden shout rang out from the darkness. It was Guido's voice. He broke into a run, almost dragging the bewildered commandant behind him. He was shouting orders at the top of his leathery lungs.

Men appeared from the barrack block like magic. Several had rifles in their hands, at the ready. Many were only half dressed. Bullets spat and hummed in all directions. A box of tracer bullets went up in a sheet of flame, sending streamers of flame into the outermost corners of the courtyard. Everything was in confusion.

"Now!" hissed Clarke. "Make for the gate. If the sentry gets in our way, drop him. It's out for us. Our only

chance is to slip through the gates before they notice us."

Swiftly, they launched themselves forward, hugging the shadows of the wall. They were almost on top of the startled sentry before he saw them.

For an instant, he stood frozen in surprise. Then, the reason for their presence must have dawned on him, for he swung up his Lebel and opened his mouth to shout a warning.

Clarke leapt forward like a bullet from a gun. His rifle was already raised above his head, fingers gripping the cold steel of the barrel. All the weight of his powerful body lay behind the downward blow. The butt of the weapon caught the sentry full on the forehead. With a low, bubbling moan he dropped to his knees and rolled off the parapet to fall with a sickening thud to the courtyard, several feet below.

Nimbly, LeBreau leapt in and caught the rifle as it fell from the man's nerveless fingers. In almost the same movement, he propped it against the embrasure, scrambled down the stone steps leading into the courtyard and heaved the heavy cross-bar out of position.

"*Quickly!*" He urged the American forward. "Outside! And no noise, *mon ami.* No noise! Otherwise there'll be hell to pay."

With a convulsive motion, Clarke hurled himself through the slit in the gates, pausing only to pull them shut after him. It would be several minutes before anyone noticed that the cross-bar was no longer in position—or discovered the body of Carlsen, the sentry lying sprawled on the ground. And by that time, they hoped to be well on their way.

Slowly, the shouting and the confusion and the sharp clatter of the exploding ammunition died into silence as they struck out from the fort, taking their bearings from the stars, heading due east. In front of them, the silence of the desert stretched away and away, seemingly forever.

There was a thin crescent of a moon on the low horizon

where the sand tumbled away into smooth drifts; a dull barrenness of yellow death. There was a sandstorm blowing a few miles off. They could just make it out in the faint shimmering of moonlight. A hissing, writhing cloud of death-dealing dust that scudded away over the face of the desert. But it was too far away to bother them any, and Clarke finally satisfied himself that it was heading away from them.

"We'd better put as much distance between ourselves and the fort as possible before dawn," he muttered quietly, easing the rifle more comfortably across his shoulders. "We won't be able to travel much during the day. It would be too risky for one thing. Too many Arabs knocking around this area for my liking."

The other nodded and turned his head slightly to glance behind them. Fort Agadez had already disappeared into the night. Only a faint, flickering glow told them in which direction it lay.

Overhead, the sky was enormous. A great, curved, glittering immensity, filled with scattered stars. But it was cold, damned cold. And there was a bitter wind, whimpering over the sprawling dunes, throwing up tiny clouds of stinging sand into their faces.

The desert was a cruel place. A world of its own, cold during the night, a scorching hell in the day. A place that broke men's hearts and made empty shells out of their bodies. Creatures that moved and spoke, ate and drank and cursed, obeying orders liks machines. But there was nothing inside them.

A hard, kindless place where life was an endless round of starvation and thirst, an unceasing march through unending miles of death and quiet, creeping fear. Where the next sand dune might disclose an oasis shining with the promise of precious water—or hide an Arab intent on ending your life with a home-made bullet.

Moving swiftly, they made their way through the shifting sand towards where they guessed the dawn would appear. With an effort, Clarke repressed a sudden shiver and pulled his tunic tighter about his broad shoulders.

So far, so good. But there were still many, many weary kilometres to go before they came within sight of El Keb. And when Colonel Minassous discovered that they had gone—what would happen then?

They knew too much to be allowed to live. And although he might reason that the desert would take care of them—that was too uncertain a death for a man like the commandant. He would need proof—have to be quite sure. And because of that, it was highly likely he would send a party out after them.

The utter enormity of the situation hit him for the first time at that moment. If ever a miracle were needed, it was needed now. The most damnable part of the whole business was the way in which everything seemed stacked against them.

They were working blindly on a hunch with nothing definite to go on. Perhaps Valland and Heston had been mistaken. And the records had not been faked. But if everything was so regular and above board as Minassous would have everyone believe—why was he on such intimate terms with Sergeant Guido? And why had the two legionnaires not been tried at Algiers in the normal manner? And above all, would anyone in authority believe this fantastic story of theirs, with no real evidence to support it?

Perhaps, he thought wearily, stumbling forward through the shifting, yielding sand; *Perhaps Valland and Heston were the lucky ones after all. They were dead now. Nothing mattered to them any more. The starvation and the bitter thirst was finished as far as they were personally concerned.*

Chapter Three

LEGIONNAIRE SCHARF

Colonel Marcel Minassous paced the floor of his office with an animal restlessness. His huge hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically behind his back. Black anger clouded his hard features.

With a swift gesture, he whirled on the two men standing in the background. He was in an ugly mood and his subordinates knew it.

"You're sure of the men who escaped?" he asked a second time. "There can be no mistake?"

Captain Le Roche glanced uneasily at the thick-set figure of Sergeant Guido as if seeking some encouragement there. But the colonel was looking directly at him, so there was nothing for him to do but to rack his brains for an answer.

If only he could have a drink. It was impossible to think straight at a time like this without a drink in him. But Minassous kept all the brandy well hidden. He licked his dry lips and forced himself to think, to untangle the muddle of ideas that whirled inside his fuddled brain.

"The guard at the gate was dead when we found him, Colonel," he said finally, holding on to the back of the chair. "He had been struck over the head with the butt of a rifle. From what we were able to learn by piecing the facts together afterwards, it would appear that the fire in the auxiliary magazine was begun purposely."

"That fact would be obvious to a child," snarled Minassous angrily. He spun on his heel and faced Guido. "What else have you been able to discover? How close

were these men, Clarke and LeBreau to the men we executed this morning?"

Sergeant Guido stepped forward. A faint filming of sweat covered his broad features though it was by no means warm in the room. "Both men were on guard duty in the cells during the time legionnaires Valland and Heston were kept prisoner. They could have spoken with the English pigs, even though you ordered that no one was to speak with the prisoners."

"And they were sympathetic towards the prisoners. That's true isn't it? Well, Sergeant. Isn't it?"

Guido nodded unhappily. "The evidence available seems to point that way, *mon Colonel,*" he said harshly.

"Exactly." There was naked scorn and sarcasm in the commandant's voice. "Then why weren't these men kept under strict surveillance? Answer me that, *Sergeant.*"

Guido shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "They can't get far, *mon Commandant.* If the Arabs don't get them, the desert will. Several men have tried to escape from Fort Agadez in the past. Those whose bones don't lie out there, bleaching in the sun, ended their days in the hands of the Tauregs."

"So?" The colonel's voice was soft, but there was a dangerous undercurrent of menace in it that made the others take notice.

"Then you suggest that we should forget about it and trust to blind chance that they don't reach the headquarters in Algiers alive."

Guido shrugged, not answering.

Minassous glanced scathingly across at Le Roche. His voice was like ice: "Well, *mon Capitaine!* What is your opinion of the situation?"

Le Roche pulled himself together and drew his thin body upright. It was all very difficult. What with the raging

thirst at the back of his throat and Minassous shouting continually at him, asking him these stupid questions.

His lips shaped words: "I think Guido has a point there when he says the desert will take care of them. It's more than three hundred kilometres to Algiers from Fort Agadez. They'll never make it. I doubt whether they'll even reach the nearest oasis. And without water, they'll soon die.

"Besides, what will happen if they do reach headquarters. No one will believe the ravings of a couple of deserters from *La Legion*, especially when you testify that they too, were associated with the ring-leaders of the past revolt. And there's also a charge of destroying Legion property. We have direct proof that one of them, possibly both, had a hand in the fire which destroyed the magazine."

"That's true, of course." Minassous controlled his rage with a great effort. He lowered himself into his chair and toyed idly with the silver paper-knife on the top of the desk. "But it would be stupid to leave things such as this to chance. Perhaps you had better organise a search patrol in the morning as soon as it breaks light, Sergeant. And issue the order that the men are to shoot on sight. And shoot to kill."

Sergeant Guido gave a harsh laugh. The muscles of his face tautened. Then he frowned slightly. "Maybe it would be wiser to dispatch several patrols, *mon Colonel*," he muttered thinly. "We have no knowledge of which direction they took. They could be anywhere within several square kilometres."

"Yes, yes, of course. That's sense, I suppose." Minassous nodded his head. "Are you sure you can handle it? I leave you to visualise the consequences of failure."

"There'll be no chance of failure. I promise you that, Commandant."

"Excellent. Then get the men ready as soon as it's light. And another thing, Guido. If you should manage to catch

up with our—friends—search them well. I want to know the whereabouts of those identity discs. It's highly probable that if they get into the wrong hands, they could hang us all."

The Sicilian nodded meaningly. "Perhaps we may even take them alive," he murmured quietly. "If we do, there are ways and means of making them talk. Tell us all they know."

The commandant stroked his chin reflectively. There was a peculiar expression on his grim features. "There's one point we seem to have overlooked," he said ominously.

"Oh!" Guido seemed surprised. He leaned forward, tense. Minassous twisted the silver knife in his fingers so that the light from the overhead lamp threw shards of glittering colour into the far corners of the room. He tightened his lips.

"It just occurred to me. What if they decided not to head for Algiers; knowing that that would be the first place we would think of?"

"But where else could they go?" interrupted Le Roche. "It would be sheer suicide for them to head for a Legion outpost. The commandant, whoever he was, would soon put them in the detention cells for desertion. That's obvious."

"Yes, but what if they headed instead for—El Keb!"

Le Roche thought a moment. El Keb! The name sounded vaguely familiar but for the moment, he couldn't place it. Perhaps if—— He eyed the small cupboard where Minassous kept his brandy.

"That's right, dolt!" roared the colonel. "El Keb! With any luck at all, they could reach it easily within a couple of days. And once there, they could tell everything they know to Picard, head of the Bureau Arabe.

"And they'll listen. Even where headquarters wouldn't

listen to their tale, Picard would sit up and take notice. Nothing escapes them. Hell!" He whistled thinly through his teeth. "We ought to have thought of that before."

"Then we'll just have to make sure they don't reach El Keb." There was a new determination in Guido's grating voice. "I'll arrange for every available man to be out on patrol tomorrow."

Le Roche flickered uneasy eyes towards the walls of the room, peering out through the dark square of the window as if trying to locate Clarke and LeBreau from there. He shuddered, ever so slightly.

"We're all finished if they tell all they know to the Bureau Arabe," he said dully. His words fell harsh in the muffling silence of the office.

"We're well aware of that point, Le Roche," snapped Minassous sharply. "Pull yourself together, men. They won't get away and——"

He broke off. There was a sharp knock on the door. For an instant, he stared round at the others, then recovered his composure.

"*Antrez!*" he roared.

The door opened and the orderly corporal came into the room. He stood stiffly to attention, looking from one man to another. It was clear he hadn't expected there to be anyone with the commandant.

"Well, what is it? Speak up man!"

Corporal Brizetta threw up a stiff salute. "A new legionnaire has just arrived, *mon Colonel,*" he said briskly.

"A new legionnaire. What—at this time of night?" Minassous looked non-plussed. For an instant, his eyes were wide in his head as if he could no longer believe his ears. Then he recovered himself and sank back into his chair.

"When did he arrive?" he snapped.

"A few moments ago, *mon Colonel.*"

"I see. Very well, *Caporal.* Take him over to the main barrack block and arrange a cot for him. See to it that he reports to me first thing in the morning. There are some questions I must ask him. Routine matters."

Corporal Brizetta hesitated a moment, then cleared his throat.

Minassous glanced up. His eyes slitted and his features hardened. "Well, what are you standing there for. Get out! Back to your post. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Why—why yes, Commandant. But the legionnaire asked that he might see you now. He said it was exceptionally important."

"Important! Important!" roared Minassous, rising to his feet. His face purpled. He reached forward and pointed down at the sheets of documents in the other's hand.

For a moment, he seemed to have difficulty in getting his words out. Then, with an effort, he found his voice: "What's the name of this miserable dog, *Caporal?*" he yelled. "I'll have him in the punishment cells for this. A legionnaire doesn't demand audience with his commandant. *I* send for *him.*"

"Oui, *mon Colonel.*" Brizetta was almost beside himself. "His name—certainly." He held the papers up towards the light and scrutinised them closely. "No. 330221 Scharf, *soldat premier classe.*"

Minassous paused. His mouth dropped slackly open, his eyes were wide and round in his head. For an instant, it seemed to Sergeant Guido, watching his superior closely, that the good colonel almost choked on the words.

"Legionnaire Scharf," repeated Minassous. "Are you sure of that?" The blood seemed to have drained from his face. He sank back into his chair.

"Perfectly, *mon Commandant.* That is the name given here on his record sheet. 330221 Scharf."

"I see." The other voice dropped to a dull whisper. He waved his hand in a negligent gesture. "You may go, *Caporal,*" he muttered. "Send Scharf in to me."

Brizetta saluted stiffly and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. There was a strange expression in his eyes as he left.

Guido was feeling the odd sense of disaster too. Something was wrong with the colonel. He was sure of that. Why, the man seemed to have changed almost immediately. His face was suddenly old and grey. The face of a worried—and frightened—man.

What kind of a person was this legionnaire, Scharf, that he could produce such a change in a tough, hardened campaigner like Colonel Minassous? It just didn't make sense. No sense at all.

There was a knock on the door. A quiet, almost ominous sound that somehow sent tiny shivers of ice spilling up and down the muscles of his back.

Minassous' mouth moved several time before any words came out. When they did, his voice was little more than a grating croak.

"*Entrez,* Scharf!"

The door swung open. A small man stood blinking slightly in the light. He took a step forward.

"Colonel Minassous." The sentence was more of a statement than a question. "My name is Scharf. Legionnaire Carl Scharf. I was posted here from El Waddi two days ago."

Cold, cruel eyes stared directly into the colonel's. The other's mouth was a thin, hard line across the middle of his rugged features. His lips curled slightly into a disdainful grin.

"I understand you're having a little trouble at Fort Agadez, Colonel," he said in a sibilant hiss. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance."

Chapter Four

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

It was a thin-faced *caporal* of *La Legion Etrangere* who brought the news. He stood stiffly to attention as he handed the official message form to Sergeant Peter Brandon. The other studied it briefly with a frown of surprise on his lean features. His eyes narrowed. It wasn't so much the actual contents of the note that surprised him, as much as the fact that he had received it at all.

He dismissed the corporal with a brief nod of his head. The message was brief and friendly, but to the point. And there was no mistaking the urgency and the command behind it. He read it through twice to be sure of missing nothing, but it was quite straightforward. It read:

Headquarters,
Bureau Arabe, El Keb.

Bureau Agent Number Eight,
Sergeant Peter Brandon,
Top Priority: SECRET.

Peter,

We've just picked up a deserter from Fort Agadez. Seems there were two of them making the break in the first place, but the other was killed during an ambush. Looks as though there's something big about to break.

Get here as soon as possible. This is urgent and I don't need to remind you of the necessity for the utmost secrecy. We've had a recent directive from higher-up, with order to assign our best man to the case. You're it, though you'll be glad to hear that Conway is here already.

Picard.

He screwed the thin paper up into a tight ball in his clenched fist. The rising urgent pulse of excitement tensed the muscles of his body, clearing his brain. There had been little to occupy his mind for the past month and in the middle of the desert, time hung heavily on the hands of anyone who lived for the adventure that life in the Bureau Arabe provided.

Here, you lived on a knife-edge, so thin, that the slightest false move, the first wrong word, could mean the difference between life and death. When you were trained for a job like this, it became a part of you, engrained almost in your soul.

There wasn't a single cell of your brain that didn't tick over with a lightning efficiency. Self-preservation was still the underlying animal instinct in any man, and life in the desert sharpened the senses so that death might not reach out of the clinging yellow silences in the shape of an Arab bullet, or a silently thrown knife.

But in spite of the thrill and the excitement, the agents were pitifully few. Scattered over the face of the desert in key positions, listening, probing, watching. Some went out, never to return. There was no guarantee. A man went forth on a mission, with a one-way ticket.

There had been a few he had known personally, though the majority were merely numbers that flashed through his mind with no particular significance attached to any of them. But they were out there somewhere, keeping the uneasy peace between the desert tribes far more efficiently than the massed forces of *La Legion Etrangere*. The enemy knew where the forts and military installations were located. But the agents, that was a different matter.

He made his way slowly through the twisting streets of El Keb, his eyes alert. There was no telling who might be watching. Eyes were everywhere in the streets of El Keb. The enemy knew the headquarters of the Bureau Arabe were

located there, together with Verdun Barracks. And if ever wheels turned within wheels, the spy system of the desert tribes did the turning.

They got the information they wanted, one way or another. But there were some things they didn't know. Secrets that were locked away in the secret files of the Bureau. And how many of the desert chiefs would give their right arms for that knowledge, he wondered inwardly.

Ragged beggars appealed for alms with thin wailing shrieks, imploring Allah to be merciful. Coins rattled in tin cups. Peter eyed them shrewdly as he passed, ignoring their calls for aid. The vast majority of them had a plentiful supply of money.

Selling information to the sheikhs had proved extremely profitable in the past—and it could never be stamped out completely. It would require the attention of too many men. An agent for every beggar in El Keb. And what of the other cities and towns?

He thought once more of the message. A deserter from Fort Agadez! That in itself, didn't make much sense. His knowledge of Fort Agadez was scanty in the extreme, but he had a vague idea as to its whereabouts. Almost completely isolated in the middle of the Sahara, away from the main camel routes, it was a hell-hole to which only the worst type of man was sent.

Little wonder anyone had decided to pit their feeble chances against the desert and the wandering tribes, and attempt to desert. But why under the sun, had they headed in the direction of El Keb. The major had said a patrol had picked them up, but not before one man had been killed in an ambush.

That possibly explained it. Rather than risk the same fate, the remaining legionnaire had headed for the nearest town, irrespective of where it lay. Picard had his own agents in these out-of-the-way forts, of course. And it was highly

likely that he had received news of the escape almost immediately after it had happened.

But what was so important about a deserter from Fort Agadez? It was a question that nagged at him relentlessly, but he could find no answer to it. He was in a sardonic mood as he passed through the armed guards outside the main headquarters of the Bureau and headed for the major's room. Something was wrong, and the sooner he knew about it, the better.

The door of the major's room was closed. He knocked sharply, using the pre-arranged call signal. Three short knocks followed by a couple of long ones. Picard's harsh voice reached him faintly through the door.

"Brandon?"

"That's right, sir."

"Good. Come on in, then."

Peter opened the door and stepped inside. His eyes flickered over the small gathering in the room. Major Henri Picard, head of the Bureau, was seated behind his desk with the eternal cigarette in his right hand. Blue smoke curled in a thin, winding spiral towards the low ceiling.

He was squat and heavily built and powerful. And although in his sixties, there was still more life in him than in most of the men who passed through his hands. His dark eyes looked out sharply and shrewdly from beneath lowered black brows with a piercing expression that was rather difficult to face.

His features were set and fixed, as if carved from a single block of granite, giving him a battered and craggy appearance. And in his eyes, there was something of the fanatic about Henri Picard, which possibly accounted for his refusal to give up his post in the Intelligence Branch of *La Legion Etrangere,* and take up another job in a less strenuous branch.

And in spite of that, thought Brandon wearily, *he would*

probably outlive the rest of them. And in spite of his outwardly gentle appearance, there was something inside him that invoked both fear and respect.

He was the kind of man who would have ridden by the side of Ghenghiz Khan when he rode on a trail of slaughter and destruction into Europe, would have sat quite calmly in a single plane, his thumb poised over the tiny red button that would send a hell of flaring atomic destruction bursting over an unsuspecting Japanese city. A man who thrived on war and its accompanying violence. A man who——

Thank God he's not on the other side! thought Brandon with a sudden flash of clarity.

"Right," said Picard tersely. "I suppose you want the whole story now." He stubbed out his cigarette in the silver tray at his elbow and leaned back ponderously in his chair. His face was stern and unrelaxed.

Peter nodded and flashed a look around the room, taking in everything, every detail in a single glance. There was a long table running down the centre of the room, flanked by several cushioned chairs. One wall was covered entirely by a vast, contoured map, studded with clusters of tiny, outjutting flags, each representing a fortress under French control.

Quite a nice little empire, thought Peter to himself. A hundred odd major forts, all on the alert, each a tiny entity in itself, a breakwater against the flood of fanatical humanity that lay in wait in the desert.

Some of the utter tremendousness of the job which he, and others like him were doing, struck him at that moment. Watching and controlling an empire such as this, maintaining trade routes, keeping the scattered tribes in constant check, preventing war and infiltration of the different tribes.

And in spite of all this, they and their work had to remain completely in the background. Never, for a single moment, could they come right out into the open. Impressiveness

and grandeur and a show of power and might would not have worked in a case like this.

And thus had come the Bureau Arabe; remaining virtually a non-entity in the overall scheme of things. Standing as it were, in the background of events, operating and controlling and keeping law and order in a vast, outflung empire of naked sand and sun-scorched oases.

With an effort, Peter jerked himself back to the present. Jerry Conway, the Canadian agent, stood over on the other side of the room, leaning forward a little nonchalantly, his hands resting on the back of a chair. His face was thoughtful. He grinned slightly as he caught the other's glance. Peter nodded briefly, then let his gaze travel on.

There was another officer, a captain of the Spahis, in his magnificent scarlet tunic and sky-blue trousers. His face was vaguely familiar. Picard noticed the expression of concentration on Brandon's face.

He inclined his head sharply towards the officer. "I believe you already know Captain d'Iverville of the Spahis. He was present when we cleaned up the Desert Horde, you remember."

Peter nodded slightly. There was a faint stirring of bitterness in his mind. But with a supreme effort, he forced it down. That was one particular episode which he didn't want to remember, if he could help it.

Picard gave him an abrupt nod. He gestured towards the chairs. "Sit down, Peter," he said quietly. "And you too, Conway. This is a purely informal meeting. We don't stand on ceremony here. This thing is too important, too all-embracing, for that."

He leaned forward on his elbows and waited patiently until the others had seated themselves before speaking again. Then he said gently:

"Presumably you all know why this meeting has been called in the first place. Though you may not realise the

gravity of the situation. Two men deserted from Fort Agadez, one of the loneliest outposts in all of French West Africa. It's located here."

He climbed briskly to his feet, crossed the room, and jabbed his forefinger at the large map. Peter stared at it, fascinated. He recognised the area immediately, though he knew little of it from personal experience. Way out in the desert, many kilometres from anywhere.

His eyes narrowed in deep thought. Tiny, scattered bits of information were beginning to slot themselves together, falling into place in his agile mind, like the bits of some grotesque jig-saw. He began to add two and two together. But oddly enough, this time he got five instead of four. Something still didn't make sense; tie in with the general overall pattern.

He grew aware that the major was speaking again: "At first sight, you'll probably be asking yourselves: What has all this got to do with the Bureau Arabe? After all, men desert from these fortresses daily. Some get away with it. Others die, by various means.

"Why then should we take such an interest in these men." He paused briefly, then continued: "One of these men died as the result of an Arab ambush. The other is here, in this building. The Legion authorities in Algiers have asked that he be turned over to them to be tried and sentenced as a common deserter.

"I'm afraid I had to over-rule that. He can be extremely valuable to us. After we've obtained all the information we require from him, I'll consider what to do with him."

Brandon glanced up sharply. He waited until the major looked round, then raised his hand slightly.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Major," he said tensely. "I can quite see that this case has some interesting points which make it stand out from the others. But why is this man so important to us?"

Picard tightened his lips. "I rather expected that question to be thrown at me during the early half of the proceedings," he said finally. "The underlying fact is that: somehow, we've got a lucky break. We don't get many in this kind of work, but for once we seem to have been fortunate. If this man had been picked up by the Arabs, he would have died—and if the patrols had caught up with him, he would have been whipped inside the penal cells so fast we would never have gotten near him.

"And in either eventuality, we'd have lost our source of information. Dead men tell no tales, out here in the desert, the same as anywhere else." There was a faint touch of bitterness in his tone.

He lit a cigarette with the silver lighter, inhaling deeply. "Fortunately, for us, this man talked. At first, I was inclined to dismiss his wild tale as an attempt to escape justice. A feeble attempt at that. But on thinking it over, I decided to check up on a few things, and for the most part, they substantiate his fantastic story.

"I'll let him tell you it in his own words, just as he told it to me a couple of days ago. Then you can judge for yourselves. I can promise you, you'll find it most interesting."

He thumbed a concealed button beneath his desk. There was silence for a long moment in the room. Picard toyed absently with a tiny shining statuette, tossing it slowly from hand to hand. There was a deep scowl across his rugged features. He regarded the others with a penetrating stare that was both direct and piercing in its blue intensity.

Peter leaned back in his chair, his gaze on the ceiling. No matter how hard he tried to stop it, his brain kept coming up with questions he couldn't even begin to answer. He threw a swift glance at the chronometer on the bare wall facing him, with its thin, red sweep hand circling the round

clock face, marking off the seconds, never stopping. Like the tireless machinery of his own mind.

Why this sudden interest in Fort Agadez, anyway? And what use was such an out-of-the-way place to anyone except the die-hards of the Legion. A tiny, isolated fortress, tucked away in some obscure corner of the Sahara. It didn't make sense. He shuffled the ideas around in his mind, playing with them like a stack of cards. But like cards, they still refused to come up with the right answer. There were obviously too many jokers in the pack.

There was a sudden, sharp knock on the door. An instant later, the door slid open and two men entered. Brandon recognised the first immediately. The orderly corporal. Behind him, limping a little, came another man in a stained uniform, his face haggard and drawn. There was a deep, livid scar across his face, running from beneath his right eye to his chin.

He drew himself up stiffly to attention as the corporal withdrew at a nod from the major. The door closed softly.

Picard waved his hand towards the empty chair near the head of the table. "Take a seat, Clarke," he said gruffly. "You can speak freely here. These men are all agents, waiting to help you. Do you understand?"

The other gave a slow, lazy nod of his head. There was a bleakness in his deep-set eyes. His features were a mask of tight greyness.

"I understand, sir," he said, the words a low mumble from between his teeth. The muscles of his throat corded as he spoke.

"There isn't much to tell, really, I guess. My name is Legionnaire Clarke, an American stationed at Fort Agadez." He spat the words out with an almost explosive violence as if they left an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"LeBreau and myself escaped from the fort some time ago. I forget when exactly. It doesn't really matter any-

how. We intended heading for Algiers at first, but that was too far away. We would never have made it."

"You only just made it here," reminded D'Iverville quietly. He regarded the legionnaire with a narrow-eyed stare.

Clarke hunched his shoulders forward, his face hard. He eyed each of the others in turn, before continuing. Then he said harshly: "Before going any further, I suppose I'd better explain certain things about Fort Agadez—and Colonel Minassous, in particular.

"We all knew what kind of a hell-hole it was when we were first posted to it, but recently it became ten times worse, if that is possible. There were two men in the fort, their names were Valland and Heston. A couple of Limeys, both legionnaires, and both buddies of mine.

"Why Minassous picked on them, I'm not quite sure. Anyway, they were both arrested and accused of attempting to lead a mutiny in the fort. There was no truth in this charge. All of us in the fort knew that. But they were thrown into the punishment cells, just the same.

"Guards were posted on the strict orders of the commandant, but no one was allowed to speak with them. Anyone foolish enough to disobey received twenty lashes from Sergeant Guido, in front of the rest of the company."

He paused and glanced down sharply at the table in front of him, not really seeing it. When he finally looked up, only the white-knuckled grip on the edge of the table, told them that he was not a stranger. His eyes were clouded.

"Go on, man," urged Picard tautly. "Repeat what you told me a couple of days ago."

Clarke swallowed hard. He was visibly trying to keep a tight hold on himself. His fingers lifted and clenched themselves into a tight-balled fist. He brought it crashing down on the top of the polished table.

"An untrue account of their crimes was forwarded

through the normal channels to the headquarters of the Legion in Algiers, in which Minassous informed them that owing to its isolation, it was unfeasible to send the two prisoners back for trial. As a result, they were tried in secret session at the fort and sentenced to death.

" Even then, we still didn't believe it to be true. Things like that couldn't happen, even in the Legion. But we didn't know Minassous." Clarke's lips curled in a cynical sneer. His eyes were hard, glinting in the harsh light like slivers of molten steel.

"And what of Minassous?" questioned Brandon, fumbling forward in his seat. " Where does he come in on this deal?"

Picard was nodding absently to himself, his lips pursed, the fine lines around the edges of his mouth deepening just a shade. He looked round almost casually, probing Clarke with his keen glance.

The American turned slightly in his chair to look directly at Brandon. " It won't take me long to tell you all about him," he muttered thinly. " He's a downright, cold-blooded murderer! Nothing more! True to his word, he had those two men brought out and shot in front of the entire garrison. God! It was nothing short of sheer murder.

" That's why LeBreau and I decided to beat it. It took a helluva lot to stick that place, but it wasn't that which made us escape. Like Valland and Heston we knew a little too much of the good commandant's activities."

" I see. You mean he's mixed up in some illegal activities? Is that it?" d'Iverville sucked in his cheeks. There was an expression of concern on his bland features.

" That's the gist of it," muttered Picard, taking up the story. " I didn't believe half of this, of course, when Clarke first told me it. But there are certain facts in his favour. I've checked on our friend, Colonel Minassous, very thoroughly.

"Apparently, his record before entering *La Legion* was not what it could have been. Obviously most of it was overlooked in the beginning and forgotten by the time he received his commission. But it leads me to the conclusion that he would need little inducement to turn against France.

"There is more to this than meets the eye. Which is why I'm inclined to believe Clarke's story."

"Then how is it we've heard nothing of this through the regular channels?" asked Conway, curious.

Picard smiled. "As far as the Bureau Arabe is concerned," he reminded, "there are *no* usual channels. We have to rely merely on information such as this." His smile became grim.

"It looks to me as if our friend, Minassous, has built up quite a nice little place for himself, way out there in the middle of the desert. Away from prying eyes, with no one to bother him.

"My guess is that he's completely ruthless and cunning. Nothing will be allowed to stand in his way. And he realises the full significance of his position. Which is why those two men had to die. If they had talked, it would mean the end of his role as commandant of Fort Agadez."

"Then what do you think he's doing now?" asked Brandon quietly.

"Probably intent on consolidating his position, thinking himself to be secure. I've no doubt he sent out a patrol after Clarke and the other deserter, but in the desert, there are a multitude of things that can happen to a man.

"Perhaps he's trying to take over complete control of that particular area for some reason known only to himself at the moment. And when he does that, he'll be on top. Believe me, whatever happens, we mustn't underestimate him. That would be almost as fatal as giving him that area on a silver plate. He's a devil whichever way one looks at the situa-

tion. And unless we move fast, the situation may get completely out of hand."

Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So that's the way of things, is it?" he said gently. "I'd no idea it was anything like that."

"It's like that—and worse," muttered the major grimly. He nodded to Clarke. "That's all for now, Clarke," he added thinly. "Thanks for your information. You've been most helpful. You can rest assured that we'll look into it most carefully. I've an idea you've let us in on something unparallelled in the history of the Bureau Arabe."

He waited until the other had left the room before turning to the others seated around the long table. There was a grimness on his bluff features that Brandon had never seen before. His face was straight and set in the harsh brilliance that poured down from the overhead lights.

"Well," he said finally, "that's it, I suppose. There isn't much more to tell. Something is about to break, and whatever it is, it's big. How big, it's a little difficult to tell at the moment.

"The first thing we have to do is get more information. It may be that this man's story is a concocted tissue of lies, put forward in the hope of saving his miserable neck. But I don't think so. It's too fantastic to be anything but the truth."

Brandon nodded slowly. That's how things were in the Bureau Arabe. The ordinary legionnaire only saw one side of it. It had all been tremendously exciting at first. Strangely fascinating. The wide desert with the isolated forts standing out against a hell-burned sky that was a massive mirror reflecting the silence of the sun-scorched sand. The deep, empty silences that lay over the desert every night.

But as time wore on, it began to rankle. The novelty wore off, and the sentive, feeling part of the mind, what little was still left of it after a year or so, retreated into some

dark, tight little corner, out of the way, and never came out into the open again.

Somehow, it was like losing a part of yourself. But the work and the danger and the lurking death went on without cease. *It had to.* Because without it, the Legion could no longer survive.

He grew aware that the Major was looking fixedly at him. Swiftly he jerked his mind back to the problem on hand.

"We've got to have someone there, on the spot, to get hold of first-hand information. Preferably two men, just in case. You're one of them, Peter. Conway will be the other. You'll leave for Fort Agadez as soon as possible.

"And remember, this time there hasn't got to be a slip-up. You realise that, of course. Because the fate of the Legion, and the law that comes with it, depends completely on the ultimate success of your mission. That's why I can't entrust it to anyone else."

Peter glanced up at the flat expanse of the ceiling as if hoping to find an explanation there. Then he looked back at the other. He grinned.

"Any further instructions before we go, Major?" he asked quietly. "What happens when we get there?"

"That's entirely up to you. Once you set foot in Fort Agadez, you're on your own. I'll see you get a complete dossier on the fort, together with all the information we have on the officers and men there. And don't take any more risks than you absolutely have to."

Brandon shrugged. The shadow of another bitter assignment was cold and suddenly dark over him.

"There isn't much to go on," he admitted gently. "But we'll do our best. It might be advisable to have a couple of men watching the fort from a distance. We may have to get out—fast. And I wouldn't like to think of an Arab patrol waiting for us, as they did for Clarke and LeBreau."

"I'll make all the necessary arrangements for that to be

done," said Picard. He stood up, his eyes burning with a fierce gleam beneath the shaggy black brows.

"And above all—be careful! I can't emphasise this point too strongly. Minassous may be watching for a move from us. He won't have eliminated this possibility altogether. You can be sure of that. It was only because of blind luck that we're where we are now. He will be watching for any attempt on our part.

"But, remember! I'm not asking you to commit suicide. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll do our utmost to get you both out of that fort in one piece."

"Yeah . . . sure . . . thanks," muttered the other thinly. He shivered. There was a darkness in him. It had all started again.

The same old story, the same tale of death and destruction; oppression and intrigue—the ultimate hatred that sprang up between opposing races, both intent on capturing the same thing. And in the end, it was equally likely to destroy both.

Chapter Five

MYSTERY AT FORT AGADEZ

The heavy iron-banded gates of Fort Agadez swung ponderously open to allow the small caravan to enter. There was silence from the men pacing the battlements, but a growing mutter from the others moving around on the great courtyard. At the rear of the small caravan, Sergeant Peter Brandon watched the scene inside with a detached curiosity.

On the face of things, it was a normal scene. The sun blazed down on the hard-packed ground of the courtyard with a searing, hellish violence. Men stood around in little mur-

muring groups, rifles propped carelessly against the stone walls.

Obviously they were expecting no surprise attack from the bands of wandering Arabs. The heavy gates grated back into position with a sound of thunder, bolts were slipped into place.

"Doesn't look to be anything wrong here," muttered Jerry, from the corner of his mouth. He stood glancing about him, screwing up his eyes against the flooding heat of the sun. His broad features wrinkled in sudden thought.

"Doesn't seem to be," repeated Peter without conviction. He kept his voice purposely matter-of-fact and flat. He could feel the men watching him, wondering, whispering among themselves. But he was careful not to look about him too closely. He kept his head down and studied the ground beneath his feet.

The sun blazed down on his skin, searing at the back of his neck, even through the protecting neckcloth. Sweat rolled off his body in tiny rivulets. His legs were tired with the long march.

"Now what do we do?" asked the Canadian softly.

"Not sure yet," Sergeant Brandon said. "We'll have to go carefully. But—watch yourself ; here comes the commandant."

Someone was coming through the door of what appeared to be the commandant's office, on the side of the parade ground. A man of medium height with a rugged, expressionless face. He held himself rigidly upright, with the military bearing of an officer of the Legion.

But it was his eyes that caught and held Peter's attention. Cold and empty and cruel ; lit with a spark of fanatical purpose that almost frightened the Englishman. So this, he thought grimly, was the dreaded Colonel Minassous. He was beginning to see what the American, Clarke, had been getting at.

His gaze flickered to the man who walked by his side. A short, fat man, his features twisted into a sneer of hate. This would be Sergeant Guido, the Sicilian, he decided. The description of these two scoundrels, given by the deserter back at the Bureau Headquarters, had certainly been correct. Up to a point.

Because no verbal picture would give an accurate idea of the hate and the cruelty that seemed to hang around these two men like a black aura of night.

These were the men who ruled this lonely, half-forgotten outpost with an iron fist. Dangerous men who would stop at nothing to achieve their own ends. He watched them with a careful scrutination through lowered lids. It would be best not to appear too curious. That could only lead to trouble.

They stopped when they were less than half a dozen paces away. The colonel looked them up and down.

"So," he snarled harshly. "These are the reinforcements they send me to replace the men lost in the recent actions, eh?" His hard voice was pitched just one note too high for Peter's liking. Here was a man, he decided, who lived in a little world of his own making. A scheming, totally amoral egomaniac, puffed up with his own sense of importance.

A man who lived continually on a razor edge of highly-strung emotions. Clear-witted for most of the time; but it would require relatively little to send him over the brink of madness. He would bear watching.

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped. If they refuse to send me real men, there's little I can do about it. What the devil do they think I'm running here—a rest home for senile legionnaires?" He glanced round at the man by his side.

"Take charge of them, Guido. See that they're given a bed in the barrack block. Then get them out on the square. If they think they're getting a soft time of it, they're mis-

taken. This is a tough outpost. I will not tolerate slacking of any kind."

The sergeant saluted, as the commandant walked off, his shadow bobbing grotesquely behind him on the hard-baked sand. He disappeared inside the door of his office, slamming it loudly behind him.

"All right, scum!" shouted Sergeant Guido impatiently. He came forward, eyes glinting, tapping the side of his right leg with his cane. "So you're the men who volunteered so kindly for action at Fort Agadez?"

His thin lips curled slightly in a grin of malicious anticipation. There was a definite tinge of mockery in his deep voice. He looked them up and down for a long moment, then went on harshly:

"Well, if it's action you want, you're going to get it. Make no mistake about that, *mes enfants.*" He glared at the Canadian.

"You!" he snapped. "What's your name?"

"Legionnaire Conway," said the other quietly. There was a note of calm insolence in his tone that angered the Sicilian.

"So? You think this is all some big joke, eh? A Canadian pig. Well, I am Sergeant Guido—and I give the orders here. Remember that, dog. Otherwise it won't seem all so very funny in a little while."

"I'll remember, Sergeant," muttered the other evenly. The Sicilian glared at him through slitted eyes, not sure whether the Canadian was being funny or not. Finally, he stepped back a couple of paces, his mouth a tight line across his flabby features.

In the waiting ranks, Peter watched the man with something more than hatred or revulsion. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary to find men such as Guido virtually in command at such out-of-the-way places as Fort Agadez,

Discipline had to be strict and the orders enforced to the letter.

But when there was also evidence that such a man was in league with the enemies of France, then it was a totally different matter. A sham. His fingers curled tightly around the butt of his rifle. It was only with a supreme effort that he managed to relax his body.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to bring up his Lebel and kill this goddam swine out of hand. But that would do nothing, except rid the Legion of a down-to-earth scoundrel. There were more important things at stake. But Guido would meet the end he deserved, Peter promised himself that much, as he stood there.

Ten minutes later they found themselves in the huge barrack block on the edge of the square. At the moment it was empty apart from the Canadian, himself and the three other legionnaires posted with them to Agadez. The majority of the other occupants were either drilling on the dusty square, or pacing endlessly along the sun-burned ramparts, eyes staring out across the desert.

Briefly, Peter found himself wondering whether the Arabs ever would attack this isolated outpost. The tribes were gathering out there, in spite of what the commandant so obviously believed. And, somehow, he had the odd idea that whoever it was Minassous was in league with, it certainly wasn't the Arabs. There was someone else. Someone standing out there in the background, giving orders, seeing that they were carried out.

The all-important question was: Who was it? Was there some deeper meaning behind the outright murder of the two English legionnaires, Valland and Heston? It seemed possible, but so far they had nothing on which to go. No real evidence.

That would have to come later. Already his brain was twisting into a tightening web of purpose. A score of ideas

flitted through his mind and one by one he threw them out, rejecting them as useless. The first thing he would have to do, would be to get into the colonel's office.

Perhaps in there, he could find a few answers to the questions that had been nagging at him since he had left El Keb. Perhaps——

The fire-burned hours of the long afternoon dragged by in a blind insanity of parading and marching, feeling the heat shocking up from the square, seeping through the heavy boots, searing down from the walls and the brazen mirror of the desert sky.

Only when the night fell in a sudden, startling swoop of cold blackness, did the incessant shouting of orders stop. Back in the barrack block, Peter threw himself down on the iron bed and relaxed himself completely. Tired as he was, he knew there would be little sleep for him that night.

"Hellfire!" muttered Jerry suddenly, sitting up on his bed. He winced a little as he put his feet on the ground. "If this is a sample of the discipline at Fort Agadez, I don't blame those two guys for deserting. I'm inclined to try it myself."

"It's been a long day, I suppose, Jerry," yawned Peter. He stretched himself, eyeing the other occupants. Most were snoring loudly, dead-beat, dark shapes beneath the thin blankets. None were near enough to make out what they were saying provided they kept their voices down.

"Keep your voice down, just in case. Minassous might have the idea that one of those two deserters reached El Keb. He may have put a spy in to keep an eye on us."

"What have you got in mind, bud?"

"I'm going to make an attempt to get into the colonel's office. That's where we'll find the evidence, if there is any. We'll wait until the lights are out, and everyone's asleep."

Jerry managed a wry grin. Peter knew what he was thinking. It was moments like this that made you realise

just how alone you really were ; and how far away you were from friends.

Deliberately he kept his face expressionless. But deep inside a dark anger and fear coursed like fire through his brain. It had all begun again. Once more they were in the midst of danger and death that stood ringing them about.

An hour passed. And then another. Peter shivered in the clinging darkness, clenching his teeth tightly together in his head as the chill of suppressed excitement took him. Around him, in the vastness of the barrack block, there was no movement.

Men grunted and moaned in their uneasy sleep ; and in the distance, somewhere outside, there was the unmistakable sound of the night-sentries, walking with a measured tread along the parapets.

Cautiously, he raised himself on his elbow, slid his feet to the cold stone floor, and touched the Canadian on the arm. The other came awake in an instant. Without a sound, he slipped from beneath the thin cotton sheets, fully dressed. His face was a formless blur in the darkness.

" All set?" whispered the Englishman. His voice was a low, uneasy sound, lost in the night.

" Lead the way, bud."

" Good. We must get out through the window and lower ourselves to the ground. It shouldn't be too difficult and they may have men watching the entrance. Besides, as far as I can remember, it's covered by the man in the machine-gun tower. Just in case the men decided to make a break for it, I suppose."

He picked his way slowly, carefully, between the orderly ranks of beds, stiffening into immobility as a man turned in his sleep. The nearest window was closed, and it would have been fatal to risk opening it by force. He speculated a moment, then passed on to the next. This slight precaution

proved to be correct. The window was half-open, letting in a thin stream of cold air.

Grasping the sides of the frame with both hands, he was able to squeeze his body through the opening and an instant later he was hanging by his fingers from the window. A quick glance satisfied him that no one was watching, and digging his hands and feet into the cracks between the massive stones of the wall, he began his downward descent.

Above him, the stocky form of the Canadian appeared in the opening. Slowly, he began to lower himself towards the ground. It was a hard climb. Not so much because of the distance, as the fact that the handholds were almost non-existent.

Several times Peter only managed to save himself from pitching headlong to the ground by scrabbling madly at the wall. His arms and shoulder muscles were aching abominably by the time he felt the ground beneath his feet. A moment passed. Then Jerry dropped down beside him.

"Where to now, Peter?"

"Keep your eyes open." The other cast about him, noting the position of the shadowy figures on the walls. "There's no way of telling a friend from an enemy in this place. If we're seen, it'll probably mean the end of this little mission."

"And the end of us, too, I'd guess," muttered the other. He merged his body with the wall. Above their heads, a couple of sentries exchanged a moment of murmured conversation as they met and passed each other on the parapet.

Treading warily, they made their way along the side of the courtyard, keeping well into the shadows. The great stone walls curved endlessly into the night, and everywhere they saw guards, and more guards. Perhaps Minassous was expecting trouble after all.

They reached the furthermost edge of the courtyard without being seen, and darted noiselessly across the twenty yards

of open space, to throw themselves against the outer wall of the commandant's office, breathing heavily. So far, so good.

But the real difficulty was to get inside. As he had anticipated, the door was locked, but there were still ways and means of gaining entry. Digging into his tunic pocket, he came up with a slim bunch of steel keys. He smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. Minassous would give his right hand to know about these, he decided.

The first key grated in the lock as he twisted it gently, but it refused to give. Carefully he tried another. That, too, failed. But the third clicked into place immediately and the door swung silently open beneath his hand.

Warily he slipped inside, motioning to the Canadian to close the door behind him, and keep watch from the window. By now his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and he was able to make out the long desk in the centre of the room, and the two filing cabinets standing against the far wall.

"Better close the shutters, Jerry," he said tersely, "just in case there is someone watching, or some guard takes it into his head to come snooping around. They may see the light."

He waited until the other had pulled the wooden shutters across the window before snapping on the small hand-torch and flashing the pencil-beam around the room.

The filing cabinets looked inviting, but on second thoughts he decided against going through them. Only a fool would keep confidential information in such an obvious place as that. No. The knowledge he wanted would be carefully hidden away from prying eyes.

Throwing a swift glance in the direction of his companion, he prowled around the small room, his sensitive fingers probing behind the bookcases, feeling for hidden compartments to the long desk. But there was nothing.

There were papers scattered about on the colonel's desk, arranged in untidy piles. He rifled through them impatiently, but there was nothing of importance there. Troop movements in the area served by Fort Agadez and the posting of new men to the fortress. He checked through the names carefully.

His own and the Canadian's were at the bottom of the list, together with the others who had come in with them. He scanned the others keenly. Apart from a single posting, five days earlier, the last man to be posted to Fort Agadez had arrived over a year before.

He narrowed his eyes and focused his gaze on the solitary name which had been written in, a little way above his own. Clearly it had been written in by the colonel himself.

"Legionnaire Carl Scharf, posted to Fort Agadez from Legion Training Camp, Saida."

That was all. Peter let the paper slip from his fingers on to the desk. On the face of it, everything seemed to be in order. But there was a little voice nagging him at the back of his mind, telling him that something, somewhere, was wrong.

A question popped up unexpectedly into his brain: *Why had a man been posted direct from Saida to Fort Agadez?* It simply didn't make sense. New recruits were never sent to places such as Fort Agadez as a first posting. Only the hardened veterans, the old campaigners, were considered tough enough for these outposts.

Legionnaire Carl Scharf! The name ran through Peter's brain in a never-ending cycle. But it didn't ring a bell. It was one he had never heard before. And certainly, the Bureau Arabe had nothing on him.

He turned his attention away from the desk. There was clearly nothing there that would have repaid a further search. And already time was passing. He looked about him,

scrutinising every likely hiding place. Minassous had been clever—damned clever.

"Anything here?" asked the other sharply from the window. Peter shook his head slowly. "Nothing so far," he answered. "But it's here somewhere, if we could only lay our hands on it. There's no other place he could keep it, and still be sure it wouldn't fall into the wrong hands."

He looked back at the tall green filing cabinets standing against the far wall. Perhaps he had been wrong about it not being there, he decided. Maybe, the colonel was even more clever than he had given him credit. He went forward. A key glinted in the lock of the nearer cabinet.

Carelessness? Or the product of a subtle, scheming mind? Peter couldn't be sure which. Obviously, Minassous had never considered the possibility that anyone would enter his office with the intention of searching for damning evidence against him. He turned the key quietly in the lock and pulled the metal drawer out, flashing the light from the torch over the neatly filed papers.

Balancing the torch on the edge of the drawer, he ran through the papers carefully, taking in everything. For the most part, they were merely details of every man in the garrison. Nothing there on which to hang a man for treason, thought Peter wearily.

He made to slide the drawer back into place, then stopped as something caught his eye. The length of the drawer inside was almost a foot less than the overall length of the cabinet. He smiled grimly to himself. So that was it? A secret compartment at the back.

Carefully he probed the inside of the metal drawer with his fingers, searching. For a moment it seemed he had guessed wrongly. Then a tiny outjutting stud snapped inwards from the pressure of his fingers. A square section at the rear of the drawer slid aside.

"Got it," he said exultantly. "Make sure there's no one

in sight while I go through these papers, Jerry. Believe me, this looks like something big. Far bigger than even the major anticipated."

Gently he pulled the papers out into the light, allowing his gaze to run down the lines of closely-packed writing. What he saw made him realise the utter enormity of the situation that faced them.

Chapter Six

THE LEGIONNAIRE GIVES THE ORDERS

By the time he had finished reading through the sheaf of papers, Peter was beginning to feel slightly sick in the pit of his stomach. At first, he had imagined all this to be merely another case of a fort commander becoming too greedy and avaricious for his position. Ready to throw in his hand with the Arabs in the hope of bringing off a *coup* against the French.

Well, he thought wearily, it had turned out that he was wrong. This was more than that. Much more. He held in his hands sufficient evidence to convict not only Colonel Minassous, but Sergeant Guido and a certain Captain Le Roche, on a charge of high treason against France.

Quite suddenly he realised that the seemingly insignificant fortress of Agadez was a time-bomb in the middle of the desert, ready to explode at a moment's notice. And the repercussions of the outbreak would be felt all over the world ; not merely in France alone.

He turned to call over the Canadian, then stopped as the other stepped sharply away from the window.

"Quickly! Douse the light! There's someone coming."

Pausing only to push the papers back into the secret compartment, and close the drawer of the cabinet, Peter snapped off the light of the torch. Jerry fumbled his way towards him.

"Did you see who it was?"

"No. It was too dark. But there seemed to be a couple of them at least. Possibly three. I couldn't be sure."

"Damn. They're probably coming here. We've got to get out of sight."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the courtyard outside. Gruff voices were talking together, though they were too low for Peter to make out clearly what they were saying.

"Quickly!" Peter fumbled behind him. During his search of the room he had noticed the heavy curtains that hung across a tiny alcove at the rear of the room, immediately behind the filing cabinets. "Through here. And for God's sake, no noise. No noise!"

He slid into the alcove beside the other and pulled the thick curtains across in front of them. An instant later, the door opened and a voice which they recognised as belonging to Colonel Minassous said harshly:

"Close the door, Sergeant. We don't want anyone to know we're here. Those sentries up there have sharp eyes. Which could be unfortunate. They may start talking as they did when the two spies were shot."

There was the sound of the door being closed quietly. Boots scraped on the stone floor. Someone fell against a chair and cursed angrily beneath his breath.

"Pull the shutters across the window, Guido," said another voice which they did not recognise, "and we'll have the light on."

The sergeant's rough voice reached them a couple of seconds later.

"The shutters are already drawn across the window,

Captain. You can put on the light. It's quite safe. No one will see us from outside."

There was a sharp click and a thin column of harsh light spilled in through the heavy curtains. Peter pressed himself further back into the tiny alcove.

"Are you sure the shutters were closed?" There was a trace of surprise and bewilderment in Minassous' voice. Peter could almost visualise him standing behind his desk, blinking his eyes against the light, staring across at the window.

"Of course, *mon colonel.*" Guido spoke respectfully. He seemed to be standing at the opposite side of the room. "Is there anything wrong?"

"No," said Minassous with a little snap in his voice. Peter peered through the slit in the curtains. Guido was standing nonchalantly by the window, staring across into the tight-lipped face of the commandant, seated behind his desk, his flabby body flowing over the chair. He seemed strangely ill at ease.

A little nearer at hand was a taller man, a captain, whom Peter had never seen before. Obviously the man was Captain Le Roche, also mentioned in the evidence in the secret drawer.

Peter smiled. A meeting of the conspirators. Nothing suited him better. Perhaps now he could learn more of their plans. There were many things he didn't know. The finding of those papers a few minutes earlier had changed things quite a lot. It meant he would have to find new answers. He didn't know them yet, but he did know enough to be able to formulate the right questions.

That was if he ever got the chance to ask them. And from past experience he knew that this was really the toughest part of the game. Incorrect answers stemmed from asking the wrong kind of questions. And quite often, in the Bureau Arabe, if you asked the wrong kind of questions, you didn't live to hear the answers.

He grew aware that the captain was speaking again: "We should never have killed those two men. That was our first mistake, Colonel. Executing them in front of a firing squad was insane. It brought us out into the open, gave us the kind of publicity we didn't want. The kind we can't afford in this dangerous game."

"That's enough, Le Roche!" snapped Minassous, sitting bolt upright in his chair. His flabby features were white with rage, and his deep-set eyes were blazing in his head.

"I don't make all the orders around here. You know that as well as I do. When I received the order that these men knew too much and had to be eliminated, I had no choice but to have them executed. Sending them out into the desert was too uncertain.

"They could have survived. One can never be sure that the Arabs pick them up. But a bullet is certain."

"Perhaps. But what about the two deserters. They were never recaptured if I remember correctly. Where are they? Perhaps they are still alive, wandering around out there in the desert, heading for Algiers with their story."

Guido jerked up his close-cropped head. "And who would believe them if they did tell their wild tale to Legion Headquarters? No one, *mon Capitaine*. No one."

That's what you think, thought Peter quietly. *Unfortunately, the more fantastic a story, the more likely it is to be true.*

"Exactly," went on Minassous. His face was tight and grey in the harsh actinic glare from the overhead lights. "If the Arabs didn't get them, the Legion patrols will and they'll find themselves shot for desertion before they can tell their mad story."

"But I still think we were fools not to go about it in a different manner," persisted the captain. There was a thin filming of sweat on his face although the room was cold. "It could be that——"

He broke off as a sharp rap came on the door. Minassous half rose to his feet, his hands flat on the polished top of the desk. There was a mixture of surprise and consternation on his quivering features. Sergeant Guido pulled a revolver from his holster and pointed it menacingly at the door.

"Who's there?" called Minassous. His voice was little more than a high-pitched croak. Peter watched carefully. Maybe someone else wanted information as much as they did themselves.

A voice called something from beyond the closed door, though it was impossible for Peter to make out the words. Clearly, however, the commandant recognised them, for he suddenly relaxed and sank back into his chair. Some of the colour was beginning to come back into his face.

Sergeant Guido stepped forward and opened the door, unlocking it with a swift movement. Peter stared. A man in legionnaire's uniform stepped inside, closing the door swiftly behind him. Thin, cruel eyes slitted themselves against the light, glittering in the depths of hard, swarthy features.

"Why, Scharf," muttered Minassous. He seemed jumpy, nervous. "We weren't expecting you. What is it you——"

"I've been watching the three of you all day," said Scharf with an ominous quietness. "I suspected something like this. Now, what's going on?"

There was a veiled threat in his tone. "You wouldn't be taking any decisions behind my back, I hope. Because that would be just too bad. For all of you."

"Why no. Of course not. We merely——" Le Roche stopped suddenly as the other turned to glare at him.

"I'm not asking for your answer, *Captain.*" Scharf spat out the final word as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth. He seated himself on the edge of the desk, leaning forward so that his face almost touched the commandant's.

"To be quite truthful, I came to discuss an important

matter. I thought it would be best to wait until everyone was asleep. It's just been brought to my notice that we received five men as further reinforcements today. Is that true?"

Minassous nodded. He fingered his tunic nervously. "There were five men posted here today. Yes, but I——"

"Why wasn't I informed of this? Don't you realise by now that I inspect every man in this fort. You blundering fool, Minassous. You almost wrecked our plans right at the very beginning."

"But I——what exactly do you mean?" The colonel looked startled. He seemed almost beside himself with fear. Sweat was streaming from his face, running in tiny rivulets down the folds of flesh in his cheeks.

"Two of those men were Bureau agents, sent here to spy on us by Major Picard, head of the Bureau Arabe. One of those men who escaped, Clarke, the American, managed to reach El Keb. By now, he'll have spilled all he knows. And yet you sit here, calmly thinking yourselves to be secure."

"Bureau agents!" Minassous sprang to his feet. His face was white. His hands gripped the edge of his desk, white-knuckled. For a moment he remained stiffly upright. Then he regained control of himself and sat down.

"That's impossible," he muttered softly. "They couldn't possibly know."

"Nevertheless, my dear Colonel, I can assure you that they do. Unless you take action at once, your very life is in grave danger. Not to mention my own."

"Then what do you suggest we do? And who are these men?" Guido spoke from the window. His voice was hard. There was death in his eyes.

"Their names are Brandon and Conway, the meddlesome Englishman and Canadian. But be careful; they're dan-

gerous men. And as slippery as eels. They must not know that we suspect them.

"My plan is this: Tomorrow they will be sent out with the desert patrol, together with any other men we can spare. Unfortunately, the patrol will be wiped out completely. Sheikh Zayd Muhammed has little love for Bureau agents, since his kinsman the Sheikh Masjik el Masifa was killed by them a little while ago. Everything is arranged. There will be an ambush on the way."

"I see." Minassous nodded his head. "It will be done as you say. And that means we must push our plans as quickly as possible. If Picard already knows about us, we've very little time."

Scharf nodded. His face was hungry as he backed towards the door. "Until tomorrow, Colonel," he murmured with a faintly mocking laugh. "I trust our friends enjoy their first patrol."

Five minutes later the two officers and the sergeant left the office, and the place was in complete darkness. Peter crawled stiffly from the hiding place and stretched his body gratefully. A riot of half-formed thoughts and ideas were running through his brain. Things were happening far too fast to be taken in fully at the moment.

So Minassous was planning their timely demise the following day. Everything had been arranged with the Arabs. But unfortunately he and Jerry hadn't been consulted. Which meant that a lot of things could happen during that patrol which were not foreseen by the colonel.

Carefully he relocked the door behind him, keeping a watchful eye on the sentries pacing back and forth overhead. He had the right kind of questions now. And he believed he knew where the correct answers could be found. But there was still a joker in the pack.

A simple legionnaire recently posted to Fort Agadez.

A man who gave orders to the commandant himself.

Chapter Seven

AMBUSH!

The rolling sand dunes shivered and heaved like a sick man. A peculiar, mind-staggering motion of yellow and scorching shadow that twisted oddly on the nerves, and tugged subtly at the stomach muscles with a faint retching of nausea. The air was hot and heavy, burning the back of the throat and going down like an inferno wind into shuddering, aching lungs.

Brandon stared about him, squinting up against the hellish fury of the sun, watching the slack-mouthed officer who led the tiny patrol. Even on such short acquaintance, he was not the type one expected to find in a hell-hole such as Fort Agadez. A half-drunken egoist, who cared little for his men and took no heed of the advice of anyone.

It was easy to see why Minassous had sent him out on this ill-fated patrol. A man like that couldn't be trusted too far, no matter what happened. It was relatively easy to keep a man in a state of constant stupor, plying him with drink, so that he remained continually blinded to what went on around him. But if there should be an investigation, that ruse wouldn't work.

So the ruling powers at Fort Agadez had decided that Lieutenant Canaldi would have to die—with the others who were too dangerous to live.

"Hell and damn!" Jerry breathed the words softly under his breath, a thin film of gathering moisture on his rugged features. He pushed his feet through the shifting sand with an almost superhuman energy.

"Seems as though there were quite a few men Minassous couldn't trust. Think that fool of a lieutenant knows what he's up against? That we're walking straight into a planned ambush."

"Not a chance." Peter shook his head emphatically. There was a grim smile on his thin lips. "In all probability he's wishing he was back at the fort, helping himself to the liquor stores."

"Stop that talking in the ranks!" Canaldi twitched his mouth. His small eyes glared with a feral brilliance in his pale face. He reined his horse with an impatient motion and came back slowly along the lines, eyeing each man in turn.

"This is a patrol, so watch yourselves. Any more of this flagrant disobedience and you'll pay for it."

Peter watched him tensely. For an instant, there was hesitation in him. If they kept on like this, they wouldn't stand a chance when the Arabs struck. They had to be prepared. But would the lieutenant believe him? The answer was an obvious no.

This was obviously the crisis point. Ahead of them, scarcely more than a quarter of a mile away, lay a low ridge of hills that reared up on either side of a narrow trail leading through them. If there was to be an ambush, that was the logical place.

The very air was taut with tension. For an instant he kept his face expressionless and very still, fighting to keep the concern off his features. He and Jerry possessed very little influence here, and he knew it. And it was just possible that Canaldi had very little liking for Bureau agents, anyway.

"Lieutenant Canaldi!" he called, keeping his voice loud and confident.

"Well, what is it?" snarled the officer, glancing down at him with narrowed eyes.

"I think I ought to warn you, Lieutenant, that we're heading into an ambush. My guess is that there's a strong force of Arabs in the low foothills a little way ahead."

"I see." There was naked scorn in the other's tone. "And how do you know all this?"

"We're Bureau agents, posted to Fort Agadez to investigate the execution of two legionnaires by Colonel Minassous a week or so ago. Last night we were in the commandant's office when he planned this little patrol.

"He already knew we were agents of the Bureau Arabe. This was arranged to get rid of us conveniently, in such a manner that no suspicion would fall on him. You and the rest of the men here were picked because none of you could be trusted any longer."

Canaldi screwed up his mouth. "Silence! Do you take me for a complete fool? I'll see to it, personally, when we arrive back at the fort that this is brought to the attention of the commandant."

"I'm afraid that makes little difference now, Lieutenant," muttered Peter, speaking quietly into the ominous silence. "You see, the good colonel has already made quite sure that none of us will ever return to the fort. Whether you believe it or not, there's an ambush waiting for us up there, less than ten minutes marching time away."

For an instant he thought he'd get away with it. There was an expression of hesitation on the lieutenant's face. He seemed to be fighting within himself. Perhaps, thought Peter, there was a little spark of awareness at the back of the other's mind concerning the colonel.

Then Canaldi's face changed abruptly. He drew himself upright in the saddle. The muscles of his jaw lumped with anger. He drew in his breath with a thin hiss and pulled his thick brows together.

"That's quite enough of that kind of talk, *mon ami,*" he snarled quickly. "I won't have any such mention of mutiny

on my patrol. Now—*marche*!" He pulled his mount round with a nervous abruptness and rode back to the head of the column, motioning them forward.

"The stupid fool!" muttered the Canadian softly. There was a scowl on his features. "At least he might have proceeded with a certain amount of caution, instead of rushing in with his eyes closed."

Peter shrugged and pushed his way forward, ploughing his feet through the hot sand. His mind sensed danger. It was there, waiting in silence among the shadows of the yellow desert. If only he could make the lieutenant see. Or the men. He glanced about him as the new thought struck him. For the most part, they were veteran campaigners. Men who had fought the battles of France from the borders of Egypt to the foothills of the Atlas mountains.

Perhaps they would listen if the officer allowed him to get that far. But it was highly likely they wouldn't. Such men followed orders because their lives depended on it. Out here, away from the main routes, death was very close. The first false move could mean the end.

Another two hundred yards and they would come within range of the Lebels of the hidden Arabs. And still Canaldi showed no sign of halting the column. He thought fast. There seemed nothing he could do. He had miscalculated, moved too swiftly, and now they were paying the price.

"Canaldi," he called. His voice compelled attention. The lieutenant looked round and stared. The other's shout had been more than a tone of command, holding as it did more than the urgency of words. It carried a desperate seriousness that made the lieutenant pause.

"You must halt this column, Lieutenant. It's our only chance. Do you want to have the lives of these men on your mind for the rest of your life?"

"*What are you talking about?*"

"You know what." Peter looked squarely at the other,

meeting the expression of scorn on Canaldi's face. He was fighting for calm.

Canaldi gripped the reins in his fist until his knuckles gleamed white. His eyes glazed with rage. "Silence, pig!" he yelled. "Any more of this foolish talk, and I'll have you pegged down in the sand. Understand?"

Silence from the hills and a growing mutter from the ranks of men.

Peter said the impossible: "Then I'm afraid that, as an agent of the Bureau Arabe, I'll have to take over command of this patrol from you, Lieutenant. If you refuse to heed my warning, there's nothing else I can do in the circumstances."

A blaze kindled briefly in Canaldi's narrowed eyes. His lips worked for a long moment before words came. He was beside himself with rage. His fingers trembled on the reins.

"Why you . . . you——" His voice failed. Abruptly, his right hand reached down towards the revolver in the holster at his waist. He jerked it out, glinting in the sunlight, the barrel pointed straight at Peter's chest. "You've said quite enough, *mon ami,*" he grated hoarsely. "I warned you earlier that I will not stand for mutiny on my patrol. It's my unpleasant duty to have to shoot you, according to the laws of *La Legion Etrangere.*"

"Don't be a fool, Lieutenant," said Peter quietly, fighting to keep the alarm off his face. This was something he hadn't bargained for. And he could no longer expect any help from the men. As soon as one man made a false move, the gun in Canaldi's hand would go off, and that would be the end of Sergeant Peter Brandon. Killed out of hand by one of his own officers.

It was all suddenly very ironic. Thoughts blazed through his spinning mind. Already Canaldi's finger was tightening on the trigger. Another second; that was all he had, unless——

The silence was shattered by the spiteful crack of a Lebel. A bullet ploughed itself through the sand in front of the lieutenant, kicking up a ragged furrow. The horse reared in sudden alarm, almost unseating the officer.

Canaldi whirled. His face was white. Sudden alarm and bewilderment flashed over his pale features. "An attack!" he yelled insanely. "Prepare for an attack."

Almost falling to the sand from the saddle, he flung himself headlong in the comparative shadow of the horse, raising his head cautiously, staring across at the low foothills from when the fire came.

Peter cursed harshly as he dropped out of sight into a hollow among the dunes. A bullet hummed uncomfortably close to his head. An ambush? Very well! There was only one thing to do in a case like that. He wormed his way grimly over the choking sand, sensing that the Canadian was behind him.

The worn, ancient hills loomed up ahead, grotesquely engraved by years of storm and harsh scouring. If the Arabs forced home their obvious advantage, the tiny column was finished. Already they were bunched together like sheep, huddling between the dunes. But if they could reach the shadow beneath the overhanging hills, they might stand a chance. A slim one admittedly, but the only one they had.

Against the mirror of the sky, he could just make out the dark specks of turbanned heads, looking down from the rocks. He smiled grimly. What contempt the Arab leader must hold him in to expose his forces like this! He wriggled across to where Canaldi lay crouched in the sand.

"Lieutenant!" he hissed urgently. "If we could only get the men forward under slight covering fire we might be able to overcome them before they can regroup their forces."

The other did not reply. Anxiously Peter pulled at the

other's sleeve. Then he saw the reason behind the officer's silence.

Canaldi toppled forward into the sand, his hat falling from his head, rolling down the side of the dune. Sunlight fell full on his face, twisted sideways in the sand. His eyes were wide open, staring out across the desert. His jaw hung slackly open.

A thin trickle of blood spilled from the hole between his staring eyes. He was quite dead. Peter glanced up grimly. He had never possessed a very high opinion of Canaldi, but the thought that he had been sent deliberately to his death by that scheming, avenging commandant back at the fort made his blood boil.

Perhaps, in his own way, Canaldi had been a reasonably good officer, as far as such men went. But Fort Agadez would finish even the best of men in quite a short while. Especially with a commandant such as Minassous. His brain tightened into a black web of purpose.

Ignoring the hail of bullets that hummed into the sand, skimming the top of the dunes, he made his way back to the others.

"Canaldi's dead!" he murmured dispassionately. "There's nothing more we can do for him." He looked about him. "Any further casualties?"

"Two more," said the Canadian quietly. "One man got it in the leg. The other in the shoulder. Just flesh wounds, but we can't move the man with the shattered leg."

Peter tightened his lips. *Leave him,* shrieked his brain. *Such a man was nothing more than a burden.* It was the logical thing to do. He knew that, but he dared not think of it. He reached a sudden decision.

"Make him comfortable here," he ordered tersely. "After that, we'll make a break for those hills. If any of us get out of this alive, we'll get him back to the fort somehow. Though

knowing what he knows now about the good colonel, I doubt whether it will make much difference."

Two minutes later they were ready. Carefully, Peter raised his head from the sheltering shadow of the dune. Their attack would have to be both swift and deadly. They had to take that hill! Because if they did, it would shake the plans of Colonel Minassous to their very foundations.

"Now!" he shouted, yelling the order at the top of his voice. "Follow me!"

His feet slipped once or twice on the shifting sand and the burning grains were in his eyes and mouth. The breath was harsh and hot in his lungs. A man screamed and clutched at his throat, staggering forward drunkenly, striving to remain upright. He tripped, fell, twitched in death, and rolled out of sight down the sandhill.

Automatically Peter aimed his rifle and blasted the place from which the shot had come. A dark figure twisted up into view for a moment, before falling back down the other side of the hills. A Lebel clattered down the forward slope.

Rifle fire became prolonged and deadly. Peter scrambled grimly forward hugging the ground, feeling a bullet pluck his *kepi* from his head. A legionnaire fell with a fixed grin on his face, his body turning over and over senselessly before coming to rest at the bottom of the slope.

With a bleak satisfaction, Peter saw that the Canadian was still there, blasting the enemy from the cover of an overhanging crag, his face tight in the scorching sunlight. Other men were moving forward under cover, from crag to crag, advancing over the bodies of fallen comrades. Incredibly, in spite of the Arabs' superior numbers, they were gaining ground.

With an effort he hauled himself up on his elbows, hoisting himself over the jagged edge of the hills, to find himself looking down into the noise and din of a first-class battle.

Lebels snarled their spiteful song of death. Legionnaires scattered in little running groups, taking up positions on either side of the narrow pass. Would they ever succeed in driving off the Arabs? Even now they outnumbered his tiny force by more than four to one. And they had only gained this foothold through a terrible loss of life.

He dropped automatically beneath the shadow of an outjutting crag and heard the wicked *ping* of the bullet in his ears as it struck against the side of the rock. The shock put an end to his philosophising. When the Arab had been shot down, there was another shot to be faced, and yet another, all coming from different directions.

The Canadian came sidling over, his face grim, his eyes bleak. "There isn't much chance of getting out of this little lot," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Still, it was a good scrap while it lasted." The vicious hum of a bullet sent him sprawling among the rocks. He cursed savagely as he came upright.

"How many men have we left?" Peter's tone was like ice. He clamped his teeth tightly together.

"Five, possibly six. Scarcely more. The rest are dead."

"I see," he said emotionlessly. "There were too many of them. Apparently Minassous wasn't taking any chances. He didn't intend that we should get away."

Jerry nodded. He raised himself cautiously. His eyes narrowed. "They're bringing up more reinforcements," he said, pointing. "See. Out there in the desert."

It was sound doctrine on the part of the Arab leader, thought Peter, nodding. There hadn't to be any mistake this time. What he had seen in the secret compartment of the filing cabinet, back in Minassous' office, convinced him of that. There was too much at stake.

"We under-estimated," he said quietly, resignedly. His voice was flat. "But we gave them a fight. *We gave them a fight.*"

"That we did, bud," muttered Jerry, eyeing the cloud of dust in the desert apprehensively. "But there'll be others ready to take over our mission and——"

He stopped. There was a stunned expression on his rugged features. He caught hold of the other's arm in a tight-fisted grip. He seemed to have a little trouble in speaking.

"What's the matter?"

"Those men! Out there in the desert. They're legionnaires!"

"You're insane!" muttered Peter impatiently. "Maybe the sunlight got into your eyes. Here! Let me take a look."

Sudden realisation came that the Canadian was right. Carefully he slitted his eyes against the sun. Vaguely he was able to make out a small body of hard-riding men, obviously attracted by the sound of firing, heading towards the low foothills. Sunlight glinted on their rifles and the blue of their uniforms. Legionnaires!"

It was the very impossibility of the attack, of rescue at the eleventh hour, that made it difficult for Peter to believe that this was actually happening. He hauled himself to his feet, merging his body with the rocks, feeling the heat of them burning through his uniform. There was blood on his arm, but he had no recollection of being wounded.

Battle was joined in a cross-fire that finally drove the Arabs out of the hills. They had now lost their initiative. The dark figures were heading for the rear of the hills, where they had obviously tethered their horses. They weren't going to stand and fight when the odds were a little more even. They were racing to get away from the murderous fire that poured into the ranks.

"Fire on them," yelled a harsh voice. A few of the Arabs knelt in the soft sand on the edge of the foothills and returned the fire, hoping to hold off a rush on the main column.

Peter looked up, feeling the harsh glare of the sun forcing its way into his brain. An officer of the Legion was there.

"Seems as though you ran into a spot of trouble, *mon brave,*" he said quietly. "Luckily we happened by. Otherwise, I'm afraid it would have been—well, you understand."

Peter nodded. There was something about this man he liked. Here, he thought, was a man with a positive outlook. An officer who faced every obstacle, short of the utterly impossible, with the definite will to win. A responsive thrill of emotion flooded through him and some of the determination of the other seemed to communicate itself to him.

"There aren't many of us left, sir," he said tautly. "But this was no chance ambush on the part of the Arabs. I'm an agent of the Bureau Arabe. My friend and I were posted to Fort Agadez, a few kilometres from here, to investigate charges that the commandant, Colonel Minassous, is a traitor against France. I guess we discovered a little too much for them to allow us to live."

The officer bit his lip. He pondered the statement for a long moment. There was a curious expression on his bluff features.

"So that's how it is, eh?" he said finally. "Your story is fantastic, to say the least of it. To anyone else, I suppose, it would sound like the ravings of a man with *le cafard.*" He smiled grimly.

"Fortunately, Major Picard is a close friend of mine. I know a little of his methods, though not being connected with the Bureau in any way. We, ourselves, are on our way to Fort Agadez bearing orders for the commandant. If you wish, you may return with us. It may be a little safer that way."

Peter shook his head slowly. That was the last thing he wanted. But in spite of that, this was a heaven-sent opportunity for Jerry and himself to cover their tracks. For a little while, anyway.

"We'll have to return to El Keb with our information," he said evenly. "Several things still don't tie up, and it's imperative the major knows about them at once."

"Naturally." The officer gave an understanding nod. "But if there is anything I can do to help——"

"There is, sir. Colonel Minassous, the commandant of Fort Agadez, must never suspect that his plan failed. He must believe that everyone in the patrol died. That way, the Bureau may have sufficient breathing space to plan the next move.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd get your men to forget that you came in the nick of time. Better if he thinks that you arrived to find us all dead."

"I understand. I'll see to it that no one suspects. Luckily, unlike Minassous, I can trust my men."

There was silence for a long moment. The officer looked out over the desert in the direction in which Fort Agadez lay. His mouth was a tight line across the middle of his face. After a moment of contemplation, he looked down at Peter again.

"I may be able to offer you more information, *mon ami,*" he said gently. "Perhaps if you were to read the confidential information destined for Colonel Minassous before he sees it."

Peter stared at the other with a speculative interest. This was far more than he had anticipated. He took the small pile of envelopes from the other and examined them carefully. At first there seemed nothing of interest.

The majority of them contained nothing more than routine orders from Legion Headquarters concerning the movement of personnel from Fort Agadez. Brandon sighed as he came to the last one. This was in a plain envelope, carefully sealed.

Cautiously he inserted the slender blade of his knife beneath the seal and prised it loose. Inside there was a

single slip of paper. He took it out and looked down at it, eyeing the scrawled writing. On the face of it, it didn't make sense.

The time has been set for ten days hence. Discover the secret and then destroy everything. The experiment must not be allowed to succeed.

Chapter Eight

PART OF AN ANSWER

For two days, Sergeant Peter Brandon and Jerry Conway made their way across the desert, heading always in the direction of El Keb. Many times they spotted hard-riding bands of camel men silhouetted against the skyline, but the Arabs seemed to have more on their hands than to take note of the two legionnaires, who kept off the main camel trails.

On the final day, they caught only occasional glimpses of Arabs, as they approached the outskirts of the walled town of El Keb. For the most part the desert tribes steered clear of the towns, particularly one which housed the headquarters of the dreaded Bureau Arabe, not to mention the tall, sprawling mass of Verdun Barracks on the opposite side of the town. In that, they were very wise.

The two men ate their final meal less than half a kilometre from the shimmering walls of the town, speaking only in short, terse sentences. Somehow the Canadian seemed to have sensed that his companion had discovered a little of what had been happening behind the scenes at Fort Agadez, but he knew better than to question the soft-spoken Englishman. The other would reveal what he knew in his own good time.

Late in the afternoon they entered the great gateway leading into El Keb, and made their way directly to the headquarters of the Bureau, conscious of the ever-watchful eyes of the natives upon them. For the Arabs, the Bureau Arabe was something spoken of only in whispers, murmured about discreetly in the shambling bazaars and on the lonely camel trails.

Something that lay hidden in mystery, but which was always there, ready to step in and act whenever anyone stepped out of line.

In silence the two men entered the tall, red-bricked building that seemed to hide itself away in complete obscurity in the centre of the town. But although the exterior bore a strange semblance of dilapidated antiquity, inside everything was different.

Everywhere there was an air of calm, unhurried efficiency. They took the elevator to the second floor to the corridor above. Along this they walked quickly, with a sense of urgency, their booted heels slamming a hollow staccato rhythm back from the bare walls, until they came to the door of the major's office.

There was an armed corporal standing watchfully at the end of the corridor. He eyed them stolidly before passing them. Peter sighed as he entered the office. The man outside should know them both by now. After all, they *were* Bureau agents and hardly subversive characters.

Still, orders were orders here as anywhere else—and there was always the chance that one of the enemy might get through. In spite of the cold, inhuman nature of the office and its surroundings, there were more secrets hidden away here than the Arab chieftains had ever dreamed of. Every move they made was known almost before it had been put into operation by some means or another. The Bureau agents were good. But then, they had to be.

The outer office was empty, but the interconnecting door

was open slightly. He stepped through into the smaller room at the rear, the Canadian pushing into his back. There, behind the desk where he always was, sat Major Henri Picard.

He glanced up sharply as they entered, his dark eyes glinting beneath the thick, black brows. There was a look of concern on his thick-set, rugged features. The piratical analogy, reflected Peter inwardly, was more than understandable.

It was almost inevitable that he should seem such a person. Here he sat, away from the other sections of Army Intelligence, controlling and watching the lives and destinies of several million natives, guiding them into the ways he chose, through a bare handful of trusted men.

"Come in, Peter," he said quietly. "And you, too, Conway. Close the door behind you."

Peter did so. Then looked back to where the other regarded him silently, his dark eyes unblinking.

"All right," said Picard soberly. "What's the verdict? What did you find? I presume there was something, otherwise you wouldn't be here now."

He lifted his shaggy brows and smiled slowly, his face creasing into fine lines that deepened a shade around the corners of his mouth.

Peter seated himself in the chair in front of the desk, and waited until the Canadian had done likewise before speaking:

"We've got a lot of the dope on Colonel Minassous. Enough to have him shot for conspiracy against France. Technically, we could do that tomorrow. But there are certain things I'm not sure of at the moment."

"Such as what?" asked Picard, leaning forward, so that his weight rested on his elbows on top of the polished desk.

Peter cocked an eye at the Canadian, then glanced back

to the major. "Briefly, the set-up is simple. It's the details that aren't quite clear."

"Just tell me everything you know," went on the other quietly. "Perhaps I may be able to supply some of the details later. But first, I'd like to hear what you've got to say."

He offered the cigarette box to each of them in turn. Peter nodded slightly and took out a cigarette. He waited until he had it going before he continued:

"To begin with, we verified the execution of those two men, Valland and Heston. The general opinion in the fort was that they had been arrested on false evidence, and executed in order that they wouldn't talk. Obviously, they knew too much about the colonel's activities.

"Naturally, this would never count as evidence against them, and it gave us no clue as to what their activities were. So we took matters into our own hands, and searched the colonel's office during the night. He had a neat compartment situated at the rear of a filing cabinet that seemed to good to be true.

"It was stuffed with confidential papers and documents that went a long way towards explaining what has been happening at Fort Agadez for over a year now. Apparently Minassous and a couple of other men, a Captain Le Roche and Sergeant Guido, a Sicilian, have been passing secret information to one of the East European powers."

"Ah!" Picard screwed up his angular features and nodded in evident satisfaction. "So we were right, after all. Excellent! You've done well, both of you. Far better than I had really hoped. It was a difficult assignment—and unfortunately, it isn't over yet, by a long way."

He rolled a cigar between bony fingers, scowling down at it. Then he put it back into his mouth and exhaled a huge cloud of blue smoke, watching it spiral slowly up towards the high ceiling.

"In short, gentlemen," he finished, "I consider the time has come for you to be fully informed of what we are up against. Then you'll see how important this affair really is. In the past, the Bureau has had to deal mainly with uprisings and insurrections on the part of the Arabs. This time, it's something bigger than that. Far bigger. Intrigue on an international scale. And we—or rather Fort Agadez—is right in the middle of it all."

"Spies, you mean?" asked Jerry. There was a trace of surprised bewilderment in his deep voice.

"Exactly. I don't need to impress upon you both that this information is highly confidential. Nothing of what you are about to hear must go beyond this door. You understand?"

"Perfectly." Peter nodded.

"Good. I won't hide from you that the situation is—well, precarious, to say the least of it. You'll hear why when ——"

He broke off as a small, concealed buzzer set over the door of the office hummed with a low, muted murmur. A red light flashed intermittently on the major's desk.

"That will be our visitor now," muttered Picard. He climbed ponderously to his feet. Walking across the room, he pulled open the door and stood to one side as a tall, distinguished-looking man in military uniform entered the room.

Peter got to his feet in surprise. His recognition of the other was immediate. But he had had no idea that the situation had attracted such high attention.

General Pironeur, head of the French Armies in the whole of French West Africa!

"At ease, gentlemen," he said quietly. "This matter is far too important and all-embracing for us to stand on ceremony here. Besides, some of your past exploits have not passed unnoticed even in Algiers, I can assure you."

He nodded them to be seated, before taking the major's chair behind the desk. His mouth was tight and there was a gleam of intense determination in his deep-set eyes. He looked down at his hands for a long moment before speaking, then said crisply:

"No doubt the major has already impressed upon you the need for complete and utter secrecy in this matter. Only a handful of men know the reason behind this renewed interest in that deserted area of desert surrounding Fort Agadez. Consequently, what I am about to tell you must go no further."

He glanced at them critically, then nodded his head as if satisfied with what he saw. "Perhaps you may already have heard of a French scientist named Professor Jacques Fireau. *Non?*" He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Then let me explain. Professor Fireau is the head of the Guided Weapons Section of the French Government. It goes without saying that he is one of their topmost scientists. Seven months ago it was decided to hold certain tests on rocket missiles in an isolated area of French territory.

"You can see what I'm getting at. The site chosen is some seven kilometres west of Fort Agadez. Already the installations have been erected and the area has been declared a military proving ground and placed out of bounds to non-restricted personnel.

"Unfortunately, it appears that lately vital information has been leaking out to certain enemies of France. Naturally, there are certain nations who would give anything to learn our secrets."

"A rocket range!" Peter whistled through his teeth and looked round at the Canadian. There was a frown on the other's tanned features.

Peter steadied himself. Purposefully, he forced himself to

think clearly and logically. The harsh actinic glare from the overhead lights seemed to fill the room with a deeply shadowed touch of unreality. He allowed his thoughts to run through his receptive mind slowly, taking his time.

His mind had done the same thing many times before. Little bits of scattered information, which previously had made no sense at all, began to slot themselves into place, forming an overall picture that had clearly been there all the time, in the background.

So many things were now obvious and readily explained. The presence of Legionnaire Carl Scharf back at Fort Agadez hovering like a bird of prey in the background, giving the orders. It was quite obvious now that he had been posted there deliberately to keep an eye on things, to see that events didn't get out of hand. To make sure that everyone, from the colonel downwards, toed the line.

He grew aware that the general was watching him curiously. There was a grim smile on Pironeur's lips. "Well, *mon ami,*" he said gently. "Is there anything you'd like to add to what I've just said? I understand from the major here you've recently returned from Fort Agadez."

"That's correct, sir," Peter nodded. He rubbed his chin. "What you've just told us fits in with what we discovered ourselves. Valland and Heston, two English legionnaires, were deliberately murdered to prevent them from getting this information through to us.

"These fiends will stop at nothing. There's too much at stake for them to stop at killing. In fact, by now, in the time it's taken for us to get back from the fort, others may have been arrested on false charges and tried for mutiny. Briefly, the set-up there is quite simple.

"Minassous is little more than a puppet in the hands of the controlling powers. They give the orders—and he carries them out. Discreetly, of course, but it's done, just the same."

"That's what we feared," said Pironeur, after a brief pause. His mouth tightened. There was a bleakness on his lips. "This is an unprecedented situation in the history of the Bureau Arabe. I realise that. Our intention," he added, "is to stop Scharf and Minassous without provoking a full-scale international war. And it isn't going to be easy."

"That's something of an understatement, sir." Peter leaned back in his chair and shook his head in mild bewilderment.

Conway opened his eyes still wider. He was neither relaxed nor indolent.

Picard leaned forward, his eyes alert. "Perhaps before we go any further, General," he suggested, "you ought to inform Sergeant Brandon and Corporal Conway just how long we have in which to stop these men."

Pironeur nodded, the light from the overhead lamps glinting off the metal insignias on the triple row of ribbons on his chest. Strangely enough, Peter caught a glimpse of the ribbon of the Medal Militaire, proving that even a general could rise from the ranks.

"Very well," said the general briskly. His deep voice compelled attention, carrying the urgency of the situation. And there was a desperate seriousness that made his listeners pause.

"The preliminary trials are due to begin in nine days' time, though this actual date is unknown except to a small number of top men."

Peter jerked forward in his chair. Nine days! It was near enough! Something flashed across his brain. The cryptic message he had intercepted on its way to Colonel Minassous at Fort Agadez.

The date has been set for ten days hence. Discover the secret and destroy everything. The experiment must not be allowed to succeed.

"I think there's something you ought to know, General," he said tensely, keeping his voice even. "I've reason to believe that Colonel Minassous knows about the date of the preliminary experiments also. That's something I didn't quite get around to before you arrived.

"Somehow, this man Scharf received word that we were Bureau agents. We were hiding in the commandant's office while they were talking. An ambush was arranged for our benefit. Quite a simple way of getting rid of us without any suspicion falling on the men at Fort Agadez.

"It almost succeeded, too, owing to the blind stupidity of the lieutenant in charge of the patrol. We ran into the Arabs as expected. There were too many for us to deal with, but a Legion patrol arrived in the nick of time. Apparently, they were carrying official documents to the colonel. The officer commanding the patrol took us at our word and delivered the documents to me before taking them on to Fort Agadez.

"With a single exception, they were all official papers concerning the running of the fort and the movement of personnel in that area. The remaining document, however, was something quite different.

"There was no indication of the sender. And the message simply stated that a date had been set for ten days hence. The colonel was to discover the secret and destroy everything so that the experiment did not succeed."

"What!" Pironeur sat bolt upright. He seemed shocked, stunned. "But I don't understand. How on earth could they have found out? It's impossible."

Picard shook his head slowly. "Nothing is impossible in the field of international espionage, General," he said quietly. "That's the first lesson one learns in a game like this. It comes as no surprise to me really, although it is a shock to

realise they're still one step ahead of us. The great reality is that we know they're aware of the date. It means we can do something about it before it's too late."

"So . . . it . . . does." Pironeur sat in thought for a moment. There was something of a giant dynamo about him as he swung in his chair to face the Englishman. "How much do we know about this man Scharf? Obviously he's a top agent of theirs. Is there anything we can bring against him that will stick. We can't prove this charge of espionage in time to remove the danger. If only there were something else, we might stand a chance."

He pursed his lips. "Personally I doubt whether I can get a postponement of the tests at such short notice. Not even in a case like this. All this information would have to go through the usual channels. And that takes time. All this infernal red tape."

"Then perhaps we can help, General," interrupted the major. "As far as I am aware, the Bureau has nothing on this man, Scharf. So far his record is clean. But that's only to be expected. He'd be a fool to make a simple mistake with this hanging over him."

"That's true." The general pondered on the thought for a long moment. Then: "But how can you help?"

Picard grinned, which accentuated the perpetual piratical appearance even more. "As you say, sir. The information we have should go through the normal channels; and maybe that's what those devils at Fort Agadez are relying on. But there is one section of the administrative body of the Legion that can cut through all this red tape."

Pironeur looked surprised. "There is! Then which is it?" The major's smile widened. "The Bureau Arabe itself," he said gently. "We take orders from no one when the security of the French forces in West Africa is threatened," he said with a ring of pride to his deep voice.

"And I think you'll agree with me when I say that this particular situation falls into that category. We can go into action at once. If the tests can't be postponed, we still have nine days in which to bring them in on some charge or another."

General Pironeur relaxed and leaned back in his chair. His face was thoughtful. "Perhaps you could at that," he said finally. "In this case we have to meet cunning with cunning. Ruthlessness with ruthlessness. It's the only way."

He lit a thin cigarette and blew a swirling cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. He chuckled dryly. "Do you think you can handle the situation?" he asked sharply, staring across at Peter.

"We can but try," replied the other softly. "We may need help towards the end if the commandant decides to bring his Arab friends into the struggle."

"You'll get all the men you need," promised the general. "I'll see to that, personally. I want you both to realise from the very beginning that this mission has the topmost priority. If you should require any further——"

He was interrupted by the persistent buzzing of the concealed warning system over the closed door. He glanced up in surprise as the red light began its intermittent flashing on the desk. Looking round at the major, he threw him a quizzical glance.

"I gave orders we were not to be disturbed unless it was vitally important," said Picard by way of explanation.

"Better see what it is," suggested the general. "From what I've already seen of this place, I doubt whether anyone would disobey your orders."

Picard nodded and hauled himself to his feet. Crossing the room, he pulled open the door leading into the outer office. An orderly corporal stood in the opening. There was

an envelope in his left hand. Saluting stiffly, he handed it to the major.

"Sorry for interrupting, sir," he said quietly. "But I was told by the messenger that this was of the utmost importance. I thought I'd better deliver it to you at once."

"Very well." Picard dismissed the other with a brief nod of his head, and closed the door behind him, locking it carefully.

"If you'll excuse me a moment, General," he said quietly.

"Certainly. Go ahead. If it's as important as all that, the sooner you find out what it is, the better."

Picard slit the envelope with a sharp motion, drawing the solid silver paper-knife through it. He took out a single sheet of closely written paper and held it up to the light.

"Good God!" He glanced round, forcing his tongue to shape coherent words. "The devils have beaten us to the punch again, gentlemen.

"*Professor Fireau has been kidnapped in Algiers!*"

Chapter Nine

A PLAN IS LAID

There was a heavy, ominous silence in the small room for a long moment following the major's statement. The words bit deep into Peter's brain and he felt his heartbeat quicken. There was a sudden keen, pulsing pain at the back of his forehead, but his eyes steadied, and surprisingly, he felt able to think logically and clearly.

The general was the first to speak, to put the thoughts that were running riot through all their minds, into words.

"You'd better get all the information you can, Picard. And fast! These devils won't waste any time now they have Fireau in their hands. They'll get all the knowledge they require from him, by any means. And believe me, there won't be much life left in him by the time they've finished."

"I'll do that right away, sir." Picard snapped down the outjutting switch on the communicator at the side of the desk.

"Get me all the available information on the recent kidnapping of Professor Fireau in Algiers," he snapped urgently. "At once! This is of the utmost importance."

The tinny, far-sounding voice of the man on the other end, murmured something unintelligible before breaking the connection.

Picard nodded, and looked up. "It'll be here within the next five minutes," he promised.

It was.

Picard took a restless turn about the room. "As you've seen," he said with a forced quietness. "There isn't much to go on. Apparently, he was picked up near the native quarter of Algiers. God alone knows what the fool was doing there in the first place; especially without an armed escort.

"He ought to have known better than to go wandering off into the area surrounding the native quarter. It was simply asking for trouble."

"You say he was picked up by a small party of Arabs," muttered Peter thoughtfully. "Obviously they knew whom to look for. Wasn't it a bit of a risk on these peoples' part to employ Arabs for the kidnapping?"

"Maybe." The major shrugged his broad shoulders and

looked down at the floor. "But then, we've no real proof that they were Arabs. They could have been Europeans, wearing disguise. It's possible. Everything happened within a few seconds.

"A guard had been detailed to follow the professor at a safe, but discreet, distance. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do. Fireau had been whipped inside the native quarter before they realised anything was happening.

"Whoever planned this little escapade, knew what he was after. And he also knew the professor's movements pretty thoroughly too. It must have all depended on split-second timing. God! If only we knew where they'd taken him."

"My guess," began Peter, picking his words carefully, "is that they'll bring him down here, into the desert."

General Pironeur rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He nodded his head slowly. "It's possible, I suppose," he said musingly. "But there's no possible proof of that."

"But maybe there is, sir," persisted the other. He leaned forward. There was a faint shiver of excitement in his brain. He felt suddenly keyed up, alert, almost nervously so.

"For one thing, if he's to give them any practical information, they'll need access to instruments and the rocket launching site. That will take a bit of doing, but with the professor in their hands, they might pull it off. Anyway, they probably think that's a chance worth taking.

"Secondly, we noticed some renewed activity in that area on our way into El Keb. There seemed to be an unusually high concentration of Arab forces stationed in the desert around Fort Agadez.

"Of course, it may have been coincidence. But from what we've learned this afternoon, I doubt it. I doubt it very much."

"That's right," muttered Picard. There was a challenge in his deep voice. "You've got it. Perhaps they've got it into their heads that we'll concentrate all our resources looking for Fireau in Algiers, and not bother about this area."

"Even so," muttered Pironeur. "What can we do about it? They're bound to have him well guarded. If we try force, they'll most likely kill him out of hand. Anything to prevent him from returning to us."

Peter drew into himself. There was a long moment of utter stillness. As far as he himself could see, there was only one solution to the problem. Someone had to go in there and get Fireau out—and alive.

There would have to be no show of strength or force. Only one man would be required, two at the most, in case anything went wrong and a report had to be got back to headquarters. Only——

Only, what happened if they failed?

He glanced up. Picard was shaking his head grimly. His eyes blinked sardonically in his taut face. It was almost as if he had read the other's thoughts.

"If we could only get one of our men into their camp, disguised as an Arab, then we might stand a chance of rescuing Professor Fireau." His glance fastened tight on Brandon.

"You've both worked together well in the past, Peter," he began harshly. "And maybe in this instance, two agents would be better than one. Do you think you can tackle the mission?"

"We'll do it, somehow," he said. "*We've got to!*" He nodded as he spoke.

There was a chill bleakness in his mind and a lump of ice where his heart should have been. It was easy enough

to fight things you could see. Here, it was darkness and the evil of twisted minds they had to face now. And in a case like this, it was a little difficult to know exactly how to go about it.

Apart from the four men back at Fort Agadez, they had no absolute knowledge as to other possible members of this insidious organisation that had suddenly sprung into being to undermine the security of French forces in West Africa. For all he knew, they could be anyone. Perhaps the general himself? He almost laughed out loud at the thought that pushed itself unbidden into his brain.

But was it so funny, after all? He would do well to remember the fact that someone in a relatively high position had obviously talked. Otherwise, how had that cryptic message been made available for Colonel Minassous?

It was a question he couldn't even begin to answer at the moment and he thrust it deliberately into the far background of his mind. There were certain things he didn't want to think about. Not at the moment, anyway. They only served to clutter up his brain with a lot of useless information.

"You'll have until dawn to prepare for this mission," said Major Picard sharply. "I can't give you any longer, I'm afraid. Anything you need will be found for you, no matter what it is. And I think you can both visualise the consequences of failure."

"I think we can, sir," said Peter evenly. His mind twisted. It was quite clear what the immediate consequences would be. An end to the uneasy peace and security that now existed between the French and the natives. An end to everything for which they had fought over the past years.

The thin line of Bureau agents had been stretched to the limits during the past years and there were already several

irreplaceable gaps in it. Men lay sprawled sightlessly in death on the yellow sand of the desert, eyes gazing blindly at the hell-fury of the scorching sun, their bones bleached and scoured by the sand, picked clean by the ever present vultures.

How ironic it would all be, if this were to fall in ruin about them, because of the life of one man, Professor Fireau, and his experiments. He shook himself savagely and pushed the dark thought away.

"We might gain some valuable information from a dossier on Professor Fireau," said the Canadian suddenly, looking up. "Can you let us have one?"

"Yes, of course." Picard hauled himself ponderously to his feet and slid open a drawer of his desk. He took out a slim blue folder. "Here it is. Study it carefully. Though I doubt whether you'll learn much from it. It's all we have."

"It may be of some help." Peter stood up and glanced round to where the general sat staring moodily at the top of the desk.

"How do we get word through to you in case we need help of any kind?"

"You don't," said the major tightly. "We'll have someone on hand, just in case. We'll get word to act, if it's necessary. You needn't worry about that."

He twisted his thin lips in a grim smile. "You've got *your* assignment. Go in there and get Fireau out. I don't care how you do it, as long as he's alive and unharmed. After that it's more or less up to you. Bring him back here if possible. If not, hide him away somewhere, where they won't find him again. You may even have to go underground yourselves."

"And if they don't intend to part with him as easily as that. What then?"

"Isn't it obvious?" snapped Picard.

It was. Peter grimaced as he turned towards the door.

"We'll get him out," he muttered grimly. "Even if we have to blast that entire area apart."

Chapter Ten

OPERATION RESCUE

The Arab camp was quiet, the magnificent string of white stallions tethered to a twisted rope stretched between two rearing palms. A solitary guard stood watch on a small mound, silhouetted against the dim moonlight, looking out over the silent desert, his Lebel slung over his shoulders.

With unblinking eyes, Peter watched him from the dark shadow of a tall tent. The man looked watchful and alert. A heavy-set, powerful individual, turning his head swiftly this way and that. Peter didn't like that alertness. It meant lightning reaction to danger and sudden movement. It meant trouble.

Peter's interest was entirely in finding the location of Professor Fireau. All the evidence they had been able to gather pointed to the fact that he was being kept somewhere in the encampment. The knowledge put a quiver in the taut muscles of his body.

Two days had passed since they had left El Keb and headed out into the desert. And in that time, much had happened. It hadn't been too difficult to locate the whereabouts of the main Arab encampment. Ten kilometres out of the town, they had spotted a large body of hard-riding

camelmen, heading west in the direction of Fort Agadez. Putting two and two together, they had followed on foot.

Reaching the camp, which they found situated less than two kilometres from Fort Agadez, they had made a preliminary survey of their surroundings, but had found nothing of interest, nothing to give them a clue as to where the enemy were hiding France's topmost scientist.

"We're wasting precious time, Peter," whispered Jerry, standing close in the shadows. "It'll take an eternity to search every place in this damned camp. There must be thousands of the fiends gathered together here."

Peter nodded slowly. There was a growing irritation inside his mind. It was the irritation of a man trying desperately to maintain his balance under extremely trying circumstances. What the Canadian had said was true, of course. The odds against them ever finding the professor were very remote. But while there was even the ghost of a chance, they had to keep on looking.

"If he's here," he said with a quiet determination, "we'll find him. We've already covered a little under half the camp."

"And what have we found?" There was bitterness in the other's low mutter. "Absolutely nothing. Maybe if we had all the time in the world, we would stand a chance. But we haven't. There are only seven days left, before the tests are due to begin. Unless we find him by then, he's as good as dead."

"If he isn't dead already." Peter pulled himself back into the shadows as the guard turned his head warily, and peered into the silence of the camp, as though sensing their presence.

For an instant, Peter thought they had been seen. The guard was obviously uneasy, alert. Tightness gripped Peter's stomach, stiffening the muscles. The man looked away

again, then seated himself on his haunches, huddled up in the flowing robes of his burnous.

Peter was more at ease again. With a conscious mental effort, he turned his attention back to the problem on hand. In their extensive search for Professor Fireau, he had grown progressively more dissatisfied. The encampment was too large. More widespread than they had at first imagined. There were more places of concealment than they had first thought.

And they had to be careful. Although generally accepted by the Arabs as two of themselves, if they were discovered, it would mean the end. There was no mistake about that.

But it was this searching and getting nowhere that fretted on his nerves. Things were beginning to break while they were stranded here in the camp. Important things going on out there in the desert. He felt sure of this. And always at the back of his mind, there was the pressing thought that these things could possibly mean the success or failure of their mission.

"What the heck!" The Canadian pulled Peter down against the smooth material of the tent. There was a trace of urgency in his hissed voice. "Don't tell me we're getting company."

"Company?" Peter jerked up his head and glanced in the direction of the other's pointing finger. At first, he could see nothing.

Then, suddenly, he was aware of dark shapes moving on the low horizon. Black dots swaying in the saddles of approaching horses, tiny but distinct against the moonlit sky. He focused his eyes intently on the spot as he had been trained to do in a case like this, until everything else around blurred and he was able to see them clearly.

He counted them as they appeared for a moment on top of a long ridge. Then they disappeared down the nearer

side. He counted five and somehow he had gained the impression that not all of them had been Arabs. There had been white men among them, legionnaires.

He looked round at his companion, his face bleak and grim. Five little black dots against the sky. There was a tiny voice murmuring at the back of his brain. He sensed his awareness growing, permeating his whole body.

Involuntary reactions took over control. Those men! It was almost as if he had seen them close up in broad daylight. Four, sweating, evil-minded legionnaires from Fort Agadez, closing in for the kill, utterly confident in themselves now that Professor Fireau was safely in their hands.

"Are you thinking the same thing as I am, Jerry," he asked softly, speaking out of the corner of his mouth.

"You think it is Colonel Minassous and his damned henchmen, coming out from Fort Agadez?"

"Have you any better idea?"

"No. But why the devil should they be coming here. At this time of night too."

Peter grinned viciously. His mouth twisted. "You don't expect him to come here in broad daylight, do you? Where any Legion patrol that happens by could pick him up in the company of his native friends. No. Our man is a little too clever for that."

He threw the other a quick glance through narrowed eyes, then went on: "But perhaps this time, he's been a little too clever. Maybe he's played right into our hands. Because my guess is, that the fifth member of that little party is Sheikh Zayd himself. Or one of his high-ranking chieftains.

"No doubt, this is where they discuss their future plans, especially where Professor Fireau is concerned. We've got to get close enough to overhear their plans."

"And how the devil are we going to do that, bud?" asked the Canadian laconically.

"We'll do it somehow. *We've got to.* It's our only chance." Peter tensed himself. The solitary guard had risen to his feet, his rifle at the ready, peering into the darkness. An instant later, the first of the riders rode up to the outskirts of the encampment.

A gutteral order rang out.

The guard murmured a low, indistinguishable reply and slipped his rifle back across his shoulders. Slowly, the men rode by in single file. They halted by the other horses, dismounted, and tethered their mounts with the others. Then they vanished into the probing shadows between the tents, but not before Peter had recognised the Arab leading the way, the folds of his scarlet burnous flapping about his broad figure. So he had been right. It was the Sheikh himself.

"Give them a few seconds to get well away, then we'll follow them," hissed Peter thinly. "And keep your eyes peeled for other guards. We can't afford any slip-up this time."

Jerry nodded meaningly. His right hand dropped to the hilt of the knife in the broad sash around his waist. His eyes glittered. "I'm ready."

A moment later, throwing a wary glance at the silent figure of the sentry, they set off, working their way between the tents, treading noiselessly, eyes alert. The other group was a cluster of dark shapes, striding forward towards the centre of the encampment.

Peter noticed this with a wary glance. Obviously, they were heading for the sheikh's personal tent. It made sense. A matter of such great importance would not be discussed anywhere else. Possibly, there would be a guard. A deaf-mute. One of the unfortunates who could be relied upon

to hear nothing, and therefore say nothing of what was taking place.

It was just as he had expected. The five men disappeared unobtrusively through the narrow opening of a richly-decorated tent. A brilliantly-embroidered pennant flew aloft. And two sturdy warriors, armed with modern rifles and cartridge bandoliers strapped across their shoulders, stood guard on either side of the entrance.

Peter pursed his lips. That made things doubly difficult. Clearly, Zayd was taking no chances. He turned to the Canadian.

"Think you can get close enough to take care of one of those sentries? I'll take the nearest."

Jerry grinned savagely. "He's as good as dead," he muttered thinly. The knife slid from his belt, glittering wickedly in the faint filtering of moonlight.

He dropped to his knees and wriggled off into the shrouding darkness. Peter gave him a few seconds, then edged his way forward, keeping his body well into the shadows. The guard were expecting nothing, but this had to be done silently—and quickly.

He dropped quietly onto the sand, feeling it cold beneath his fingers. Veering left, he wormed his way slowly forward on all fours. It was hard going, but there was not much chance of being spotted if he kept well into the shadows.

Eventually, after a slow and painful journey, he came within a couple of yards of Zayd's tent. The low murmur of voices reached his ears and the pale light of a lantern flickered through the gorgeously decorated cloth. By now, he had crawled a full circle and Jerry should be somewhere on the opposite side of the tent.

He froze into immobility as the nearer guard turned his head slightly, as if sensing his presence. Although they were deaf-mutes, they had eyes like cats. They could see quite

easily in the dark, and they possessed a kind of sixth sense that seemed to warn them of imminent danger.

Peter sucked in a low gasp of breath, waiting for the man to come forward, to bring up his rifle. But it never came. Evidently, he hadn't been seen. He could see the guards quite clearly now. A couple of massively-built fellows, possibly of Moorish origin, noted for their fanatical devotion to any cause, to any master.

Typical warriors, tall and muscular, standing rigidly to attention, silhouetted against the thin shaft of yellow lamplight thrown out through the thin opening in the tent. Possibly, the Arabs were getting careless, thought Peter reflectively. Their achievement in capturing Professor Fireau had gone to their heads.

He gritted his teeth angrily. Well, this was where that all came to an end. If they were lucky, and they could get the information they were after, Fireau would be delivered out of their hands in a few hours.

Inch by inch, he slithered stealthily forward, the knife gripped tightly in his right hand, every nerve and fibre of his body stretched to breaking point. Carefully, he edged closer to the unsuspecting guards. Then, quite suddenly, without warning, the man turned and looked directly towards him.

Peter froze instantly, holding his breath until it hurt. His heart had jumped hammering into his throat. Tiny beads of sweat came out on his forehead. His white-knuckled grip on the knife tightened. For a long moment, the guard looked seemingly straight at him. Then he turned away and resumed his former stance.

Gingerly, step by step, Peter inched his way forward. Out of the corner of his vision, he caught a fragmentary glimpse of another dark figure edging forward from the shadows. He crept forward, raising the knife.

The man whirled suddenly, as though warned by some hidden instinct. His bearded mouth dropped open in amazement. Surprise flashed across his rugged features. In a single movement, he raised the rifle. Peter lunged forward, body tensed.

The knife flashed downwards in a glittering arc, that ended in the other's back, above the lungs. The great turbanned head lolled crazily forward for an instant, then dropped loosely. He was quite dead. Carefully, Peter lowered the body to the sand, at the same time pulling it out of sight of anyone inside the tent.

Straightening himself with a barely audible grunt, he looked about him. But there was no cause for alarm. The Canadian had already taken care of the other guard. Everything had gone without a hitch.

Jerry smiled grimly. "What know?" he whispered, edging closer. "Think we got away with it?"

Peter nodded. There had been no interruption in the low murmur of voices from within the tent. It was doubtful whether the others had heard anything.

They worked their way round to the rear of the tent. After a moment's hesitation, Peter took out his knife and cut a small slit in the tent. The Canadian did likewise. Together, they peered into the interior of the tent.

The men were seated around a low table, sitting cross-legged on the smooth floor as was the Arab custom. Sheikh Zayd sat at the head, his eyes bright like a bird of prey, his square features hard. He looked round at the others.

"Then we can go ahead with our final plans, Colonel," he said suddenly, his voice thin. He clenched his hands into tight fists on the top of the table. But apart from this, there was nothing to betray the tension inside him. "The swords of my people have been dry too long. All we need

is the word to fight—and we will rise and crush these infidel French dogs who have oppressed us too long."

"I realise all that." Minassous gave a lazy nod of his head. "We ourselves did well to get our hands on Professor Fireau. Without him, the French can do little with their rocket experiments."

"Excellent. Has he talked?" The Sheikh's eyes glittered with a strangely fey brilliance.

"Unfortunately, not yet. He persists in being stubborn. But as you yourself are aware, it won't get him anywhere, holding out on us. Like you, we have our ways and means of making stubborn fools talk."

"And I personally intend to see that they're put to good use." Scharf spoke up from the opposite side of the low table. He sat still and ominous, his narrowed eyes unwinking in the flickering light.

Peter watched him intently for several moments. Here, he decided was the true brains behind the gang. A man who would stop at nothing, not even cold-blooded murder, to gain his own ends. Such a man was dangerous. He would bear watching.

Zayd was speaking again, deliberately keeping all trace of tenseness out of his silky voice. "Perhaps if we were to question him, we could get you the results you require. And far quicker. He would not survive long under the torture of a Thousand Cuts, but he would tell all he knew, before he died.

"Believe me, my friend, you are being extremely foolish to keep him alive all this time. What if the French should suspect that he is not in Algiers, but that he is being held prisoner in the punishment cells of Fort Agadez? They would act so quickly, you wouldn't stand a chance. And all this scheming and planning would have been for nothing."

Fort Agadez! The words burned themselves into Peter's brain as if coated with acid. He felt his mind stiffen. So that was where they were keeping Fireau. No wonder they had found no trace of him in the Arab encampment.

"They'll never find him, *mon ami,*" muttered Sergeant Guido, leaning forward across the table, his face evil in the lamplight. There was a leer on his wide features, creasing the lines of flesh in his flabby cheeks. "We have him well hidden. And until this little episode is finished, no legionnaire will enter the gates of Fort Agadez and leave them alive. Not even General Pironeur himself.

"You can see how careful we intend to be. The least slip-up now, could mean a firing squad for all of us." He smiled palely. "And I for one, have too great a liking for my own skin, to risk it by some simple mistake."

"And there's another thing," interrupted Minassous. "We need Fireau alive. At least, for another seven days. Without him, we wouldn't stand a chance of getting into the prohibited area of the firing grounds. He'll take us in. And that's where you come into the picture.

"Once inside, we'll plant the high explosives so that everything is destroyed as soon as we get clear. But there will be guards everywhere. They'll have to be eliminated. Some of your men will have to take care of them. Others will be needed to create a diversion, to distract their attention from us. Can you do this?"

"Of course. These scientists know nothing of the art of war. They will fall like the flies of the desert before my men." There was a note of deep sarcasm in the chieftain's voice. He tightened his lips just a shade, and maintained a casual tone with some difficulty.

"Besides, with the new modern weapons you have thoughtfully provided, our army will be invincible. Already,

we are well equipped with machine guns, automatic weapons and mortars."

Peter drew in a quick breath. The muscles of his jaw tightened. So Minassous had gone all the way, even to providing the enemy with weapons. He had had no idea that any Frenchman could have lowered himself so far.

And it was quite clear that the high officials of *La Legion Etrangere* had no inkling of the true position. It was something they would have to be acquainted with, at the shortest possible notice. But until a suitable opportunity to do this arose, he and Jerry would have to play their hand with considerable cunning, remaining in complete obscurity as far as the Arabs and the complement of Fort Agadez were concerned.

But the automatic weapons. He thought back. Dimly, he remembered the scattered attacks that had been carried out over the past two years or so, on the camel trains that had been carrying weapons to the wide-flung fortresses. So these hadn't been mere haphazard attacks, carried out at random, by wandering groups of tribesmen.

Now, it all began to fit in, slotting together like pieces of a gigantic jig-saw. There had been a definite plan behind it all. The sooner he and the Canadian discovered the structure and the potentialities of the massing Arab army, the better. Only then, would he begin to feel easier in his mind.

"Let's get out of here," whispered Peter suddenly "I've heard enough. At least we know where they're keeping Professor Fireau. The sooner we get to Fort Agadez, the better. We'll have to take a couple of horses if we're to get there before Minassous."

The other nodded. "That isn't going to be easy. There's still that other guard to take care of. And if they find him gone, they'll know something's wrong."

"They'll realise that in an hour or so, when they come out and find the two deaf-mutes gone. It would be the best for us if we got well away before that happens. Otherwise——" He pulled his forefinger across his throat in a gesture that was universal in its meaning.

Carefully, he hauled himself upright and turned towards the dark shapes of the tents standing out against the pale moonlight. And that was as far as he got.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a fragmentary glimpse of dark figures moving purposefully towards them. The flooding moonlight glinted off drawn weapons. There was a pause that lasted for the briefest moment, but to Peter it seemed an eternity.

His hand leapt down for the knife at his belt, but before he could close his fingers about the hilt, strong arms seized him roughly, jerking his arms behind his back. He had time to see that Jerry was receiving the same kind of treatment, before something crashed down against the back of his head.

Blackness seeped out of the star-glittering distances to envelop him. Only dimly, was he aware of the tent flap opening, and a tall figure staring down at him.

Chapter Eleven

PROFESSOR FIREAU

Peter woke up, cold and shivering, on a long wooden bench in a tiny, damp, stone-dripping cell. Someone he couldn't quite see was tugging at his shoulders, trying to pull him upright. A voice was murmuring something unintelligible in his ear.

Savagely, he shook his head and the dull ache at the back of his forehead brought him fully awake. He groaned and clasped his hands to his ringing head.

"God!" He mumbled the word, feeling the inside of his mouth sore and stiff. "What the devil happened? Where am I?"

"You're in the punishment cells of Fort Agadez, *mon ami*." Peter glanced round. It was a voice he didn't recognise, though he had a vague idea that he should.

The man sitting beside him on the seat was tall and thin, with the look of a man who had faced many obstacles in his long life. A hard-featured face, stamped with a strange kind of inner confidence that gave Peter something of a shock.

"The cells at Fort Agadez." Gently he repeated the words, mulling them over and over in his numbed mind, until they made a strange kind of sense. "So you're—you're Professor Fireau!"

"That is correct." The other nodded. He regarded Peter thoughtfully with a stare that was both direct and piercing in its blue intensity. "And you?"

The other rubbed his hand across his forehead. The dull ache in his head was beginning to go away. "Sergeant Peter Brandon, an agent of the Bureau Arabe," he said quietly. "We've been looking for you for quite a while now. We never expected to find you in this way though, but——"

He broke off and glanced about him in alarm. Where was the Canadian? Had the fiends taken him away? He gave a gasp of relief as he caught a glimpse of the other, still lying in an inert heap on the stone floor of the cell.

Instantly, he was on his feet. Carefully, he rolled the other over. There was a thin smear of dried blood on the

back of his scalp, but apart from that, he seemed unharmed. He groaned and sat up.

For a long moment, he glanced about him in stunned silence. Then, as if realising what had obviously happened, he twisted up his lips angrily. "Why, the dirty swine!" He stood up, swaying slightly.

"The last thing I remember is standing outside the sheikh's tent, listening to them planning a pleasant form of torture for the professor. Then——" A snarl twisted his lips as memory returned in a rush. "So they were waiting for us. I thought so. I wonder how they could have known. Someone must have talked."

"Exactly. But who could it have been? Certainly not Colonel Minassous, Guido, or Captain Le Roche. As for that man, Scharf, I'm not sure.

"There's no way he could have known that we had managed to get back to the headquarters at El Keb. No one could possibly have known that for certain. And I refuse to believe that either Major Picard or the general had a hand in this. It's unthinkable."

"Maybe. But it must have been someone holding a position of trust in the organisation." The Canadian straightened his back. His fingers opened and closed spasmodically, and his dark eyes flashed with unspent wrath. Peter watched him for a moment, pre-occupied with his own dark thoughts.

There were small drops of ice-cold water dripping from the jagged ceiling above his head. Flowing down the centre of the floor in a shallow trickle, they ran in a tiny stream beneath their feet, disappearing under the iron-bound door.

"There's no way out through there, *mes amis*," said the professor, catching the direction of their glances. "These fiends have had me here for several days now, and I've tried everything. It's hopeless."

Jerry stopped his ceaseless pacing. "I suppose we know too much for them to allow us to leave this place alive. But frankly, I'm bewildered. Why didn't they kill us out of hand in the first place? There could be no sense in keeping us alive." His lips twisted in a slight grin. "We got out of this filthy hole once, remember. We can do it again."

His voice trailed away into silence, as he realised the full implications behind this. Peter nodded. He knew exactly how the other felt.

For the first time, the overwhelming responsibility that rested on their shoulders hammered itself into his brain. It hadn't registered at first. But it did now.

He shook his head and smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. With unhurried calm, he explored the dripping walls of the cell with sensitive fingers. But as the Professor had said, they were quite solid. There was no way of escape that way.

Their captors had searched them carefully, taking away the knives and the slim, but deadly, automatics strapped to their legs. At the moment, they were unarmed. And death stood ringing them round, like a hungry darkness.

"So we're finished," muttered Fireau numbly. "Well, I can't say it's come as a complete surprise. Somehow, this Minassous has managed to stir up the Arabs of this area into attacking the rocket launching site as soon as he gives the word.

"He's a clever one, that colonel. But you probably know that he isn't the brains behind this organisation. He merely takes orders that are transmitted to him from someone higher up."

"We know." Peter nodded and seated himself on the bench. In vain, he tried to make himself comfortable. The wooden bench hadn't been intended for comfort. He let

his gaze wander around the dark walls in an attempt to take his mind off the muscle-wrenching cramp that was beginning to pull at his body.

"We've already run up against this fellow, Scharf. He's here in the fort at this very moment, masquerading as a simple legionnaire. He's the one who gives the real orders."

Professor Fireau shook his head slowly. "No, *mon ami.* It would seem that you have been deluded too. That is what I thought when I first arrived here under guard. They interrogated me, asked me a whole host of questions in an effort to make me talk. But I told them nothing."

Peter jerked upright, his back cold against the wet rock. This was something he hadn't anticipated. "You say that this man, Scharf, isn't the leader of this organisation?"

"I'm positive. There's another man who gives the orders. Who he is, I'm afraid I don't know. But he seemed to know all about you. I overheard some of them talking outside my cell a day or so ago. This man Scharf mentioned that he had recognised two men as Bureau agents, but that owing to the gross stupidity of Colonel Minassous, they had been allowed to get away into the desert.

"The leader answered that he knew all about this. And that he had arranged for them to escape, so that they might gain a little time in which to carry out their next phase of the operation."

"But did you see him? Do you know who he is. Can you tell us anything about him? Think, Professor. This is vitally important. For all we know, he may be someone in a high position in the Legion. And if that's the case, there's no way of telling what kind of hell he can brew if he continues unhindered in his fiendish work."

Fireau shook his head bleakly. "I couldn't see him at all," he admitted dully. "It was all so dark and the grille

set in the door limits your range of vision. But I'd recognise his voice if I heard it again. I'm sure of that."

He opened his mouth to say something more, but it was never said. There was a sudden rattling at the lock and a couple of uniformed men came into the cell. They approached warily. Both were armed, their eyes alert, watching every move. It seemed like a compliment to their reputation, thought Peter grimly, though what they expected of them he didn't know.

"Stand up, Brandon!" said one of them sharply, lowering his hand to the butt of the revolver at his waist. "You too, Conway. The colonel wishes to see you both. You may as well accept the fact that you're now prisoners."

The legionnaire stepped back a couple of paces and covered them both with his pistol. He traded a glance with his companion, standing well back in the shadows that clustered around the doorway.

"All right," he said finally, sharply. "Now move! And if you try anything funny, I may be forced to shoot you. In the legs, of course. We still need some information. Understand?"

Peter stiffened, but almost immediately forced his body to relax. There was a moment of utter stillness. Then, at a nod from the guard, he proceeded quietly to the door of the cell. The Canadian followed closely behind him, his face tight.

In silence, the legionnaires took them up a long series of winding corridors into a square room that stood empty, at the top. Peter looked about him in surprise. Everything seemed suddenly familiar. As if he had been there before sometime. But that was impossible, unless——

Facing him were two green-painted filing cabinets, with a long table running down the middle of the room. Minassous' office! He glanced behind him. The small

alcove, covered with its heavy drapery of cloth. So that was the secret entrance from the cells.

There was a low babble of voices outside. An instant later, the low door at the far end of the office swung open, and a group of grim, hard-faced men walked in.

Scharf was there, in the lead, his eyes glittering beneath almost non-existent brows. Behind him, with death in their eyes, came Colonel Minassous, Sergeant Guido, the Sicilian, and Captain Le Roche. Peter knew a brief moment of despair as they clustered round him in a tight circle. Scharf drew up a chair and sat down, watching the two agents through slitted eyes. His features were crafty.

"So! Finally, we've managed to run you both to ground, eh? Good. Excellent. Well, it had to come some time, *mes amis.* You've led us quite a chase, but you're finished now." His voice was almost a hiss, gentle and sibiliant.

"Tell me something," said Peter evenly, drawing himself stiffly upright. "Just how long do you expect to get away with all this. The Bureau knows all about your little plans. We've had you all under surveillance for some time now."

"Quiet! Fool! Why try to fool me by all these lies?" He jerked himself forward and Peter's head rocked back under a hammer-fisted blow. Pain jarred redly through his mind. He blinked his eyes rapidly and stared insultingly across at his interrogator.

The only chance they had now, was to play for time. Picard had said there would be an agent watching them, keeping in the background of things, waiting to report back to Bureau Headquarters at El Keb. If only he could play on the natural suspicions and fears of these men, they stood a chance. Already, he had detected a low undertone of bewilderment among the other men.

He grew aware that Scharf was speaking again, and this

time his voice was under reasonable control. "Just what did you and your blundering companion hope to gain by spying in the Arab encampment? Shall I tell you? For all your big words, you were still in the dark. Your belief was that Fireau was hidden there.

"You were searching blindly in the hope of rescuing him from under our very noses. And all the time, we had him safely here, under lock and key. We're not the stupid fools you evidently take us to be, Sergeant Brandon."

His face creased like stiff paper in a grim smile. His eyes were sardonic. "In fact, it may interest you to know that while I have been talking, Professor Fireau has already been removed from the uncomfortable confines of his cell and taken to a place where you will never find him." A touch of anger coloured his voice.

"Unfortunately, that will be of little consequence to either of you, you've troubled us too long. I think it's time to remove you. Discreetly, of course. There must be no investigation as in the last instance, when Valland and Heston were eliminated. That was most unfortunate." He flashed a glance at Minassous.

Peter stiffened and looked across at the Canadian. This was an eventuality he had not foreseen. He had been counting on the professor remaining in the fort until help arrived. He bit his lower lip in thought. His head still ached abominably and he longed for a long drink of cold water. Anything to put out the fire that was raging inside his body. He could feel little in his arms and legs.

The stabbing pains of cramp had gone, leaving only a terrible numbness. And somehow, this was even worse. With an effort, he managed to keep his face expressionless.

"Do you think that will help you any?" he muttered, between his clenched teeth. "How much can you trust these men you've gathered about you. Perhaps your filthy money

will keep them loyal at the moment, but when the time comes for facing a firing squad—as it will—they'll be only too willing to talk. Anything to save their ugly necks. Perhaps if you were to——"

Another blow caught him full in the mouth, choking off his words. Madly, he fought to keep his legs from buckling beneath him. In spite of what was happening, he had the idea that he was slowly gaining the advantage. He had to press home that initiative, turn the conversation to his own ends. It shouldn't be too difficult if he managed to keep his wits about him, and to remain conscious.

He was adjusted to fast thinking. He must do some fast talking now.

"Of course, you realise that your bluff won't work." Scharf leaned forward in his seat. "This is the end for you, Brandon. For once, you've overplayed your hand. I hold all the aces."

"You!" Peter laughed loudly, forcing sarcasm into his tone. "But what of the man who give you the orders. Are you sure he will agree to this action of yours. Be careful, Scharf. Maybe you will be in the wrong."

"That will do!" shouted Scharf. He pulled himself to his feet, his features working. "What do you know of the leader? So? That fool, Fireau has been talking. That's a pity. A very great pity. He'll obviously have to die too. But don't worry, the leader will take care of that. You see, he's the man who's taking the professor to a place of safe concealment."

"So that's it." Peter nodded. Now he saw a lot of things that had puzzled him from the very beginning.

"Exactly," went on Scharf. There was a gun in his hand and it was, Peter saw, pointed directly at his stomach. He felt his muscles tense in spite of the tight grip he had on himself. There was a thin trickle of blood beginning to

ooze down his cheek from a cut just below his left eye.

"So you intend to kill us both out of hand," grated the Canadian. "You'll never get away with it, you know. There are two hundred legionnaires here in this fort. Do you think you can keep them quiet with promises and half-threats?"

"I'll worry about that, *mes amis,*" snarled Scharf. His finger tightened on the trigger. "You will be beyond caring, anyway."

A red gleam of fanatical hatred gleamed at the back of his eyes. His thin lips were trembling slightly with suppressed rage. The man was obviously mad, thought Peter in a strangely detached manner. He actually believed that killing the Canadian and himself would bring him success in his venture.

He steeled himself for what was about to come. The end wasn't far now. *There would be others to take their places, but the Bureau agents were so pitifully few. They couldn't really afford to lose anyone.*

But that was how it went. One by one, they went down in darkness. Scharf came closer, relishing every moment. "Your Bureau can do nothing," he hissed. "Already the Arabs are moving in on the research proving ground. Another day and we will have all the information we need. After that, the good professor will be put out of the way, where he can no longer work against my nation.

"Then to destroy the rocket launching site. Our own information is that the place is not heavily guarded. The Legion are fools. They have not counted on us supplying the Arab forces with modern weapons. Nothing can stand against us!"

His voice rose to a shout. "But first, you have to die!" He drew back a couple of paces, his eyes wary, as if still

unsure of himself. Then he brought the gun up with a terrible hunger in his eyes.

So this was the end thought Peter. We were supposed to find the answer to too many things. It was more than two men could possibly do. But they had done their best. Others would profit by their deaths. The agent shadowing them. He would take back most of the information to Major Picard. In that way they would be able to——

There was a sudden, unexpected explosion behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the nearer guard bringing up his revolver. Scharf staggered back as though slammed by a fist. For an instant he stared down stupidly at the spreading red stain in the middle of his tunic.

There was a sudden loosening of the muscles of his face. Then he toppled forward, sprawling in an ungainly heap on the floor, his gun clattering towards Peter's feet.

"Get that gun!" yelled a voice behind him. "And use it! Hurry! We haven't got much time."

Peter jerked himself forward, galvanising himself into startled action. He went down on one knee, scrabbling for the pistol as Sergeant Guido collapsed over the table, a neat black hole between his staring, sightless eyes. Another roar of sound, and Colonel Le Roche dropped, twitching, behind the table.

Colonel Minassous dived for the gun in the holster at his belt, surprise and alarm blended on his flabby features. His eyes were round and very wide in his head. Calmly, Peter closed his fingers around the butt of Scharf's pistol and shot the colonel in the arm.

Only then did he look round at their rescuer. The two guards looked back at him, nodding. "Special Bureau agents," explained the taller of the two, his face grim. "Acting on special orders from Major Picard. We were

warned to stick close to you, Sergeant. Luckily, we managed to do it without arousing too much suspicion."

"You're dead right," muttered Jerry. He pulled Guido's revolver from his tight-fisted hand. "What do we do with this little lot? Leave them here for the garbage collectors?"

"That's not a bad idea," said Peter thinly. "We've got one of them alive, and the sooner we know the whereabouts of the professor, the better." He turned to face the fat figure of the commandant.

"Colonel Minassous. I hereby place you under close arrest, on a charge of high treason against France. You will be relieved of your post as commandant of this fort and placed in the punishment cells. A second charge of wilful murder will also be brought against you. But first, you're going to tell us the whereabouts of Professor Fireau." There was an undercurrent of menace in the other's deep voice.

Chapter Twelve

THE ACE IS PLAYED

Colonel Minassous talked after a little persuasion, and within an hour, Peter had the whole story as far as the ex-commandant knew it. A large quantity of high explosive had already been smuggled into the rocket launching site and was in position, waiting the order to blow up the installations.

Peter questioned the other frantically. Every precious second, could mean the difference between success and absolute failure. Apparently, the professor had been taken

to a hiding place in the desert, some three kilometers from Fort Agadez. To a cave in the low foothills that reared up out of the desert on either side of the single trail leading out of the fort to join the main camel trail to El Keb.

From the other's lucid description, Peter recognised the place instantly. The narrow pass where they had been ambushed! And this could only mean that the leader was someone who knew that area like the back of his hand. And it was fantastic to suppose he was an Arab.

Peter tried to think it out, shaking his head when he found it impossible. It could be anyone. And that was one thing Minassous obviously didn't know.

Finally, he was satisfied they had gained all the information they could. He stood looking down at the shaking figure of the colonel, seated in his chair, holding his shattered arm. His face was twisted with fear and pain. He looked down at the floor.

"You've no idea who this leader is?" repeated Peter, holding his impatience in check. There was a question in his tone.

Minassous licked his dry lips and shook his head. "That's right. I never saw him. None of us did, except Scharf. He took his orders direct from him. We others had no direct communication with him."

"I see." The other rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He turned finally, to the two guards. There was a peculiar expression on his tanned features, as if all emotion had been drained out of his body.

"Keep him here and see that no one talks to him. Better see Lieutenant Menes. He's the only officer remaining at the fort. I think we can trust him. He'll be in command until a relief column arrives. Meanwhile, one of you had better make it back to El Keb.

"Inform Major Picard of everything that has happened,

and warn him that high explosive has been smuggled into the secret proving grounds. Also that an Arab attack, with modern weapons, is imminent. He'll know what to do."

"Meanwhile, what's the programme mapped out for us?" asked the Canadian, stepping forward. There was a quiet determination in his blue eyes.

"We go after the leader of this little organisation—and Professor Fireau. We'll get a couple of horses from the fort."

"There's a jeep if you'd care to take it," said one of the guards. "You'll get there quicker."

"Excellent." Peter nodded his agreement. "Lead us to it. The sooner we get started, the easier I'll feel."

Ten minutes later, the heavy gates of Fort Agadez swung ponderously open, and the jeep headed out into the heat of the late morning. Peter gripped the wheel with a hard concentration. There were still many questions waiting to be answered. And somewhere up there ahead, among the sun-scorched rocks and the sand, lay the answers.

The jeep swerved and skidded in the soft, yielding sand, but in spite of this it was clearly the most useful vehicle to have in the desert. A heavy truck would have been useless, would have bogged down in the sand within the first kilometre.

"Think they'll be expecting us to follow them?" asked Jerry suddenly, breaking the uneasy silence.

Peter shook his head. "It's unlikely. As far as this mystery leader is concerned, we're both corpses, stretched out in the colonel's office back at Fort Agadez. Naturally, he'll take precautions, but he'll be careless. I'm banking on that, anyway. We'll have to get a break some time."

"Sure thing. That little incident of the guards turning out to be Bureau agents wasn't such a break." Jerry grinned

and raised himself slightly in his seat to peer over the glittering windscreen.

"See anything?"

"Nothing." The other shook his head. "This place looks empty as far as I can see. Sure this is the right place?"

"I'm positive. It can't be anywhere else. You can just make out the rocks ahead. About a quarter of a kilometre away. Keep your eyes peeled from now on."

They drove closer, the sound of the tyres muffled by the axle-deep sand. Peter glanced up after switching off the engine, squinting against the sun, dazzled almost by the glare. At first, the place seemed deserted. Nothing more than a heap of scorched rocks, baking in the late morning sun.

Perhaps he had been on the wrong track after all. Maybe the wily colonel had outsmarted him. But—he drew in a deep breath. There they were. Two dark silhouettes, shadowed against the rearing rocks. He pointed. "Horses! So they did come here!"

Together they made their way over the shifting sand, guns out, eyes watchful. As they progressed Peter tried vainly to ignore the twisted bodies that still remained sprawled on the sand. Grim reminders of the ambush of a few days before.

His thoughts snapped off abruptly as a sharp report from the rocks in front of them sent him diving to the sand. Madly he rolled a couple of yards to his left. Out of the corner of his vision he saw that Jerry had done the same.

"He's in there somewhere," shouted the Canadian. "But he's got the drop on us. We can't see him clearly against the sun. While he can see us quite easily." He dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "I'll work my way round to the rear. That way we can get him in the middle of a cross-fire."

Peter watched the other wriggle his way downwards, between the dunes that ran crosswise in front of the rocks. A second later he disappeared from view. Peter waited a moment, conscious of the gun trained on him from the rocks.

Cautiously he made his way forward, an inch at a time, keeping his head well down. Whoever lay in wait up ahead was no mean shot. He raised his head a little.

A bullet ploughed its way through the sand a couple of inches away. Desperately he flung himself to one side. That flash had come from a tiny ridge less than twenty yards ahead. With an effort he doubled himself up, then launched his body high into the air, thrusting himself forward as he did so.

Another flash. Another bullet humming close to his head. He ran doubled up, exposing as little of his body as possible. Madly he flung himself forward, panting, on to the hard rocks.

Slowly he pulled himself upwards, hand over hand. Jagged outcrops of stone tore at his fingers and it was difficult to move easily with the gun in his right hand.

Suddenly a voice rang out from the rocky ledge above his head: "Just a minute, Brandon! Don't come a step further or Fireau dies. My gun is at his head this very moment. He's no use to you, dead."

Peter froze. That voice! Now where had he heard it before? He tried to think. It had been somewhere in the past few days. But where? Back in El Keb? Somehow he didn't think so. General Pironeur? No. That was unthinkable.

Someone back at Fort Agadez? It seemed highly likely, but the connection didn't ring a bell.

"You don't stand a chance, you crazy fool!" he called loudly, keeping his voice even. "Come out and give your-

self up. If Fireau is unharmed, I'll do my best to get the authorities to mitigate your sentence. You'll get no mercy with a murder charge hanging over you."

"Hah! Do you think you fool me with your lies, Brandon? The professor is my only ticket out of here. He stays with me. The first wrong move you make, he gets it in the back of the head. Is that clear?"

There was a short silence. Then: "I don't know how you managed to get away from Minassous and his comrades back at Fort Agadez. I never did think it possible to trust any of them. But you are here, and the important thing is —do I walk out of here with Fireau to that jeep peacefully, or will the good professor have to die?"

Peter thought fast. There seemed to be nothing he could do without endangering Fireau's life. As the other had pointed out, the professor was no use to them dead. They needed him desperately to carry out the experiments. Without him, France would be set back several years in an important field of research.

He opened his mouth to speak again, then stopped, physically and mentally. There was a sudden sharp crack from the rocks above his head. After that, silence.

A single thought pounded incessantly through his brain. The maniac had killed the professor out of hand. A sudden anger filled him. Fiercely he pulled himself up the side of the rocks, heedless of the tearing stone, his breath coming in sharp gasps.

With an effort he heaved himself over the edge of the ridge, his gun pointing, his finger tight on the trigger. There was someone crouched in the shadows of the rocks, huddled away from the edge. Peter swung round his gun, then paused.

This wasn't the man he had expected. He peered closer. It was Professor Fireau. He stood up, looking about him,

then moved forward—and stumbled over the dead body lying twisted behind a ragged outcrop of rock.

A small stone came down from above his head, bringing with it a little shower of white sand. The Canadian lowered himself to the ledge. He stood for a moment staring down at the dead body, clad in the uniform of an officer of the Foreign Legion.

"I managed to sneak up on them from behind," he explained quietly. He was breathing heavily. "This guy was too busy talking to you to notice me. He had the gun to the professor's head, so there was nothing else I could do. I let him have it. He's dead I presume. It isn't often I miss."

Peter rolled the dead body over and stared down into the features of the leader, relaxed in death. Recognition was almost immediate. So that was the man who had led the enemy organisation in their attempt to disrupt the security of France.

The officer who had led the rescue party which had saved them from the Arab ambush. The man who had given them the information destined for Colonel Minassous concerning the date when the rocket tests were due to be carried out.

Peter smiled grimly. It had all been done very cleverly. No one would have suspected the man who had given them all this help and information. But now that he looked at it all, quite dispassionately, there had been a reason behind this seeming madness.

The leader had wanted to make sure that he knew the whereabouts of any Bureau agents who may be in the neighbourhood. And the best way to do that was to give them just enough information for them to come running into the area. And he already knew their identities.

"You all right, Professor?" He turned his attention back to Fireau. The scientist stood running his hand through his sandy hair.

"Just shaken a little. Lucky you arrived in the nick of time. He intended to keep me here and turn me over to the Arabs for torture."

"He certainly meant to get that information by any means," muttered Jerry sardonically. "What do we do with him?"

"We'd better take the body back with us to the fort." Peter nodded down towards the crumpled form. "Give me a hand with him and we'll get him in the jeep. You come along, too, Professor. After all this, I'm not taking my eyes off you for a single minute."

The journey back to Fort Agadez was uneventful. Lieutenant Menes was waiting for them when they arrived. He was a tall, aristocratic officer with a military bearing that marked him out as a good man.

Peter threw up a quick salute and inclined his head towards the jeep. "We managed to rescue the professor, sir," he said briskly. "Unfortunately, during the battle, the leader of this organisation was killed. I regret the necessity for this action, Lieutenant. But we still have one prisoner to testify. Somehow, I think he'll give us all the information we need, to round up any more that may be running around on the loose."

"Excellent." Menes nodded. "You've done well. Both of you. I'll see that a report on your work is forwarded to Major Picard as soon as possible."

He threw a quizzical glance at Professor Fireau. "You seem to have been mixed up in quite a lot of political intrigue, Professor," he said quietly. "But then, it would seem that you scientists always do attract unwanted attention. Perhaps this little episode will dissuade you from taking strolls alone in the middle of Algiers. It isn't healthy, you know."

The final chapter was played out three days later, when the Arabs, under the command of Sheikh Zayd, attacked the

rocket launching site. To Peter, watching the proceedings from the top of one of the vast, launching platforms, it was quite clear that the Arabs were taken completely by surprise.

The reinforcements they expected from Fort Agadez never came, and their modern weapons were met by a barrage of concentrated artillery fire. Wave upon wave of white-robed warriors fell in the first attack.

Fanatically they regrouped and launched themselves again at the forces ranged against them. Uttering their age-old war-cries they hurled themselves forward, only to meet a hail of fire-power that drove them back into the desert.

"That shook the blighters," muttered Jerry enthusiastically. "They never expected us to be ready for them. Probably they're still waiting for the high explosive to go off."

Peter nodded. "Maybe. Pity we found it and removed it all yesterday." He compressed his lips into a tight line. "When will these blind fools learn that they can't fight against the Legion and hope to get away with it every time?"

The Arab formation was ragged and leaderless. Already, they had been split into so many factions that it was possible for the legionnaires to pick them off with ease. The end was not long in coming. It was all over in a little under two hours.

After that, it was merely a case of mopping up the stragglers, who were completely demoralised and disorganised.

"Well," said Peter finally, "that's that. I think that's removed that particular danger to French West Africa. After this the Bureau will probably keep a tight watch on this area. And also investigate its officers once in a while. As for the Arabs, I doubt whether they'll ever be capable of putting up a show like this again."

He stood for a long moment looking down at the stretched desert that lay spread out around them as old as time itself, and the great rocket launching tubes and metal ramps of a modern age, pointing their steel noses towards the brazen sky.

A flash of the old excitement stirred in him as he made his way slowly down to the ground. The feel of the sand was soft beneath his feet.

THE END

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INTRIGUE

Away from the main camel routes, standing alone in the empty wastes of the Sahara, lay Fort Agadez, frontier outpost of *La Legion Etrangere*. A hell-hole in the middle of the desert, where men sweated and died beneath the boiling sun—and the lash of their evil Commandant, Colonel Minassous. Yet, in spite of its isolation, mystery shrouded this grim outpost.

Why were the two legionnaires, Valland and Heston, executed in front of a firing squad with no true details known as to their crime against France? And why did the hardened Commandant suddenly take orders from a simple Legionnaire? A man newly posted to Fort Agadez?

The two Bureau agents, Sergent Peter Brandon and Corporal Jerry Conway, faced one of their toughest assignments when they were detailed to discover the answers to these questions. And especially that to the cryptic message received by Colonel Minassous from some unknown figure in the background:

The date has been set for ten days hence. Discover the secret and destroy everything! This order has the topmost priority!

What really happened plunged them into one of the greatest mysteries the desert has ever known. For suddenly, without warning, they were projected into the midst of intrigue on an undreamt of scale, where seemingly important figures were merely pawns in a game which meant life or death for the Legion.